

The Southwest



THE SOUTHWEST

Few travelers come to the southwest. There's a reason for that: it's remote, and its treasures yield themselves only to those who apply the effort. It's worth it, though – miles of pristine, empty beaches, twittering birdsong in the cloud forests of the mountains, and the striking dry desert landscape of cactus stretching all the way to the border.

The remoteness and loneliness add savor and spice to the adventure. Bahía de Las Águilas is a stunning stretch of 10km of yellow sand. That you have to take a boat to get there – and that there won't be any tourists there except for you – transform it into one of the most beautiful beaches in the country.

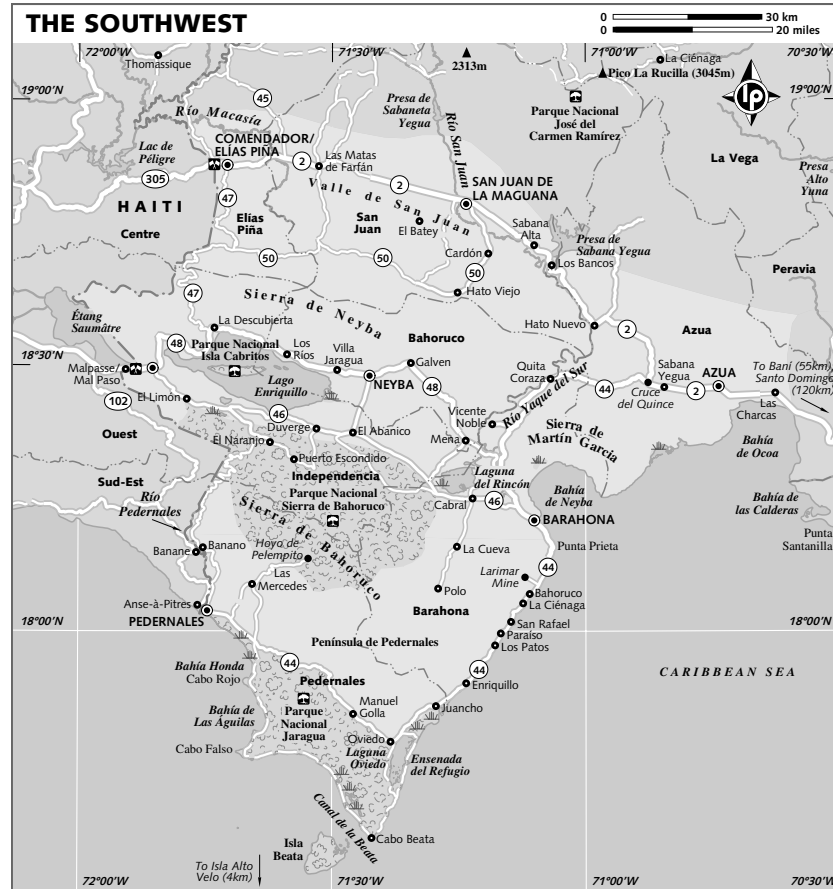
The infrastructure here remains poor – roads are bad and telephone service sketchy. But for those looking to disconnect from the wired world, this may be a blessing in disguise. Where else can you sleep in a cabin on top of a fog-bound mountain in the Caribbean and be completely confident that your BlackBerry won't work?

Towards the Haiti border you'll find Lago Enriquillo, an inland sea and remnant of the strait that once divided the island from Barahona to Port-au-Prince. Everywhere you'll see rocks of fossilized coral and, in the middle of the lake, Isla Cabritos, a national park where unique, endemic varieties of plants and animals thrive.

Last but not least, the Larimar mine just south of Barahona is the only larimar mine in the country and, indeed, the world. You can visit the mine and buy crude stones directly from the miners or purchase cut-price jewelry from the small workshops that cluster both at the mine and the coastal towns nearby.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Savor the coolness and tranquility of the cloud forest at the remote cabins of **Cachóte** (p235)
- Delight in the untouched beauty of deserted **Bahía de Las Águilas** (p237), the most remote beach in the country
- Spot flamingos and turtles on a boat tour to super-salty **Laguna Oviedo** (p236)
- Marvel at cactus flowers, butterflies and beefy iguanas on **Isla Cabritos** (p240), the lowest point in the Caribbean
- Get caffeinated at the **Polo Organic Coffee Festival** (p240) on the first weekend in June



THE SOUTHWEST

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Although there's one nominally international airport just outside of Barahona, no commercial airlines fly there, so your only way to get here is by bus or car. Caribe Tours has regular service to Barahona and San Juan de la Maguana, but after that only *gua-guas* (small buses) transit the rest of the region. Because of union agreements, *gua-guas* plying the coastal highway do not stop at every town along the way, even though they pass right through them. Be careful to get on the right bus, or else you'll be let off outside of town and you'll have to walk or catch another ride in.

If you're thinking of renting a car, be warned on two counts: there are no rental car agencies of any kind in the southwest, so rent

something in Santo Domingo; and two, if you plan on going even 100m off the side of the highway, you're going to want a really good 4WD – the roads here are astonishingly bad.

The coastal road between Barahona and Pedernales is one of the few places in the country where hitchhiking is common and reasonably safe. Only hitchhike during daylight hours, and offer the driver a buck or two (although he'll probably refuse it).

INLAND

Three highways lead west to the Haitian border. Fifteen kilometers west of Ázua the highway branches west to San Juan de la Maguana

and the border at Elías Piña, and the other leads south to Barahona. At Barahona the road splits again – the interior road runs past Lago Enriquillo to the highly trafficked Jimaní border post, and the southern road hugs the coast before dead-ending at Pedernales (where there is no border post).

ÁZUA

pop 88,000

Ázua is the first and largest town you'll encounter as you approach the southwest from the east, but it is little more than a pit stop for most travelers. There are a few hotels and basic services here, though Baní (see p115) is a much more pleasant place to spend the night.

Ázua has a couple of beaches: **Playa Río Monte** is the most popular; **Playa Blanca** is a kilometer further west along the coastal dirt road. There are also a few nice vantage points where you can sometimes spot dolphins or manta rays. The beaches are 6km from the highway, down an unmarked road a few hundred meters after entering the town from the east. If you haven't got your own car, though, don't bother.

If you need an ATM, try **Banco Progreso** (☎ 809-521-2592; 19 de Marzo). Check email at **Centro de Internet Gente Online** (☎ 809-521-2362; Av Mella 2; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-8pm).

Gua-guas to Santo Domingo (US\$2, 1½ hours) leave from a terminal on Calle Duarte, on the corner opposite the park. They depart every 15 minutes from roughly 5am to 7pm. West-bound buses pass about every 15 minutes, to both San Juan (US\$2.45) and Barahona (US\$2.15).

Caribe Tours buses running between Santo Domingo and Barahona stop in Ázua, arriving and departing from the Parque Central. If you're already in Ázua and headed to Santo Domingo, buses depart at 7:15am, 7:30am, 10:45am, 11:15am, 2:30pm, 2:45pm and 6:15pm.

SAN JUAN DE LA MAGUANA

pop 73,000

San Juan de la Maguana is known as *La Ciudad de los Brujos*, the City of Shamans. Haitians are increasingly taking the places of Dominicans who move to the big city, and the Vodou influence lurks just under the Dominican-Catholic exterior. That said, if you really want to put a hex on your ex, you might have to do a little digging – most sha-

mans live in the hills outside the city, and are definitely not tourist attractions.

Orientation

When the highway hits the town, it splits into two one-way streets – the west-bound street is Calle Independencia, and the east-bound is Calle 16 de Agosto. All of the city's hotels, restaurants and services are on those two streets. A large white arch modeled on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris stands dramatically at the eastern entrance of the city. At the western end of town is San Juan's large plaza, with a pretty cream-colored church on one side and a school of fine arts on the other.

Sometime in May – the date varies according to the date Easter falls – San Juan's faithful mount a unique procession that showcases, among other things, the strong Haitian influence in this region. Beginning in the small town of El Batey, a procession carries a small religious figurine to San Juan, some 15km away. The procession includes drumming and chanting, and it's not uncommon for marchers to become possessed by either the Holy Spirit or Taino ghosts, and to suddenly begin dancing around or speaking in tongues or to collapse on the ground. The festival continues for another day or so in San Juan, mostly in the plaza around the church.

Information

Banco León (☎ 809-557-6094; cnr Calle Independencia & Mariano Rodríguez) This bank is two blocks west of the arch, across from a gas station.

BanReservas (☎ 809-557-2230; cnr Calle Independencia & 27 de Febrero) A bank.

Cetecom (☎ 809-557-4353; Calle 16 de Agosto 49A btwn Mella & Colón; per hr US\$0.90; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) This rambling copy shop has three computers with internet access.

Codetel (☎ 809-220-7890; Calle Nuestra Señora de Rosario No 136; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Provides telephone services.

Data Center (☎ 809-557-6190; cnr Capotillo & Colon; per hr US\$0.90; ☎ 8am-10pm) Biggest and fastest internet in town, two blocks south of the main drag.

Farmacia Inmaculada (☎ 809-557-2801; Calle Independencia 45; ☎ 8am-10pm) A pharmacy.

Policia Nacional (national police; ☎ 809-557-2380; cnr Calle Independencia & Dr Cabral; ☎ 24hr) Located one block west of the large white arch at the east entrance of town.

Viajes Vimenca (☎ 809-557-2100; cnr Calle 16 de Agosto & 27 de Febrero) Travel agent; located inside a money exchange office.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotels in San Juan are generally full of Dominican business travelers, and for this reason are mildly good value.

Hotel y Supermercado El Detallista (☎ 809-557-1200; cnr Calle Trinitaria & Puello; s/d US\$29/37; ☎ ☎) This hotel and supermarket is one street up from Calle Independencia. Rooms are on the 3rd and 4th floors, surrounding a large common area with couches and tables. Rooms are a little small, but comfortable and clean. The supermarket downstairs has a payphone, ATM, plus all the produce, snacks and other foods you may need.

Hotel Maguana (☎ 809-557-2244; Av Independencia 72; s/d/tr/ste incl breakfast on weekends US\$29/39/49/55; ☎ ☎) Built at dictator Trujillo's request in 1947, the Maguana's imposing façade suggests a grandeur that has now faded. All the rooms have hot water and TV, although some lack windows – look before you leap. If you can afford it, ask for the Trujillo suite – the biggest of the bunch, and where his highness used to lay his head.

Rincón Mexicano (☎ 809-557-3713; cnr Calle 27 de Febrero & Capotillo; mains US\$2-8; ☎ dinner to late on weekends) Owned by a real live Mexican, this large, airy restaurant pumps out authentic, bite-size Mexican tacos (US\$1.80), all served with spicy salsa. Choose from white flour or yellow maize tortillas, with beef, chicken, or pork. The generous sides of guacamole (US\$1) are a bargain. You'll want three or four of these to make a meal, and the beer here is so cold it's slushy.

Il Bocconino (☎ 809-557-1616; Calle 2 No 13; pizzas US\$10-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) This top-shelf pizzeria also runs a public swimming pool next door, where you can sit around in your swimwear eating pizza and drinking beer. There's a quieter, more refined dining area on the 2nd floor, where you can enjoy quality pasta and a huge cocktail menu. It delivers (US\$1 extra), and charges US\$5 per person to use the pool.

Getting There & Around

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-557-4520) has a terminal 75m west of Hotel Maguana in the town's Caribe Tours depot. Buses to Santo Domingo (US\$6.70, 2½ hours) depart at 6:45am, 10am, 1:45pm and 5:15pm.

Gua-guas for Santo Domingo (US\$5.50, three hours, every 20 minutes from 7am to 6:30pm) leave from a terminal three blocks

east of the arch, across from the baseball field. There are three express buses (US\$5.50, 6:30am, 9:30am and 3pm), which make the trip a half-hour faster because they don't make a food stop along the way. If you're really in a hurry, **Transporte de Valle** (☎ 809-557-6200) runs a bus (US\$6.50) at 3am to Santo Domingo, arriving around 6:30am, and can pick you up from your hotel.

If you are going to Barahona, you can take any of the four Caribe Tours buses to Ázua (US\$2.15, one hour) and catch a Barahona-bound bus there. Alternatively, take a Santo Domingo *gua-gua* and get off at Cruce del Quince (US\$2, 50 minutes), the main highway intersection 15km west of Ázua, and catch a south-bound *gua-gua* from there.

For Comendador/Elías Piña (US\$3, 1½hrs, every 30 minutes from 7am to 6pm), the *gua-gua* terminal is at the far western end of Calle Independencia, past the Texaco gas station. *Motococonchos* (motorcycle taxis) may tell you that the only bus stop is outside of town – ignore them. Additionally, make absolutely sure your bus is going all the way to Elías Piña: if there aren't enough passengers, they may dump you halfway (at Las Matas) and you'll have to wait for another bus to come through (or pay a premium for a taxi).

Taxis and *motococonchos* may be found near Parque Central. You can also call a **taxi** (☎ 809-557-6400).

COMENDADOR DEL REY (ELÍAS PIÑA)

pop 26,000

Comendador del Rey, or Comendador for short, is the official name of the border town west of San Juan. However, almost everyone who doesn't live there calls it Elías Piña, which is the name of the state, and you'll have more luck using that name anywhere but in town. Comendador is best known for the Haitian market held there every Monday and Friday, when hundreds of Haitians arrive on donkeys and on foot to sell their wares.

Comendador also has a major military base and a police headquarters, and security (aimed at preventing illegal Haitian immigration) is tight. Even white travelers may find themselves detained and questioned if not carrying their passport (it happened to us).

For more information on crossing the border see p256.

Orientation

The highway splits into two one-way streets when it enters town. The west-bound street is Calle Santa Teresa and the east-bound is Calle 27 de Febrero. Almost everything you need is on or near those two streets. The park is at the eastern end of town, between Calles Las Carreras and Las Mercedes. There's a large roundabout at the western end of town, at which point the roads merge again and lead to the Haiti-DR border, about 1.5km away.

Information

For emergencies, contact the **Policía Nacional** (☎ 809-527-0290; cnr Calles 27 de Febrero & Las Mercedes; 🕒 24hr). There is no tourist police office here.

BanReservas (☎ 809-527-0907) has a 24-hour ATM at its branch office located at a traffic circle near the market on the west end of town.

Médicos Del Mundo (☎ 809-527-0369; 🕒 24hr) is near the eastern entrance of the town, set 30m off the south side of the street, across from the military base. Inside there's a pharmacy that's also open 24 hours. There's a small **taxi service** (☎ 809-839-4420; 🕒 5am-midnight).

Sights

The **Haitian market** is impossible to miss; just stay on the main road through town until you run into it. Vendors lay their goods out on the ground, shaded by large plastic tarps suspended from every available tree, road sign and telephone pole. Cooking utensils, clothing, shoes, fruits and vegetables are the primary items, sold for as little as 50% of the normal price. There's not much in the way of handicrafts, since few tourists attend the market, but just wandering around and taking in the scene is worthwhile. (And who knows, maybe you'll see a colander you like.)

Sleeping

If you get stuck here there's one serviceable hotel-cum-hardware store.

Casa Teo Hotel y Ferreteria (☎ 809-527-0392; cnr Calles Santa Teresa & Las Mercedes; s/d/tr US\$10/17/22) Every border town should have one of these places – for all your holiday hardware needs! It faces the park and is predictably grubby. A last resort (and not the all-inclusive kind, either).

Getting There & Away

The main *gua-gua* terminal is on Av 27 de Febrero, at the eastern end of the main park.

Buses for Santo Domingo (US\$7.50, four hours, every 30 minutes from 2am to 6pm). If you're just going to San Juan (US\$2.60, one hour), take one of the *gua-guas* parked just outside the terminal, as the Santo Domingo bus doesn't officially stop in San Juan. For Barahona, take a Santo Domingo bus to Cruce del Quince (the main highway intersection 15km west of Ázua; US\$4.25, two hours) and then catch a south-bound bus from there. Or use Caribe Tours – see (p229) for details.

PENÍNSULA DE PEDERNALES

The Península de Pedernales contains some of the most outstanding attractions of the southwest: Bahía de Las Águilas, Laguna Oviedo and Parque Nacional Jaragua; Cachóte; and world-class bird-watching in the Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco. It's also home to Barahona, and a number of small, friendly coastal towns.

The peninsula was once originally a separate island, but tectonic movement pushed it north and upward into Hispaniola, closing the sea channel that once ran from Port-au-Prince to Barahona, and creating many of the unique geographical features you'll see today.

The southwest is the best place on the island to go bird-watching, as you can see nearly all the endemics here. There are roughly 306 known birds in the DR and 31 endemic birds on the island. Half of these birds are migratory, making winter the best time to spot them.

Tours

ourpick Eco Tour Barahona (☎ 809-243-1190; www.ecotour-repdom.com; apt 306, Carretera Enriqueillo 8, Paraíso) This experienced, professional French-owned tour company has been pioneering tourism in the southwest since 2004. It offers good day trips to Bahía de Las Águilas, Isla Cabritos, Laguna Oviedo, Cachóte and Hoyo de Pelempito. It also offers a handful of day hikes in the hills around Paraíso, and can organize one-day and multiday horseback-riding tours. The owners and their small group of guides are trilingual. All day trips cost US\$70 and include an excellent three-course picnic lunch.

THREE BEST PLACES TO DISCONNECT

Telephone and internet service in the southwest is sporadic at best. If you want to completely unplug, here's three places where your BlackBerry will make an elegant paperweight.

- **Cachóte (p235)** – At 1400m and nestled on top of a fog-bound mountain, these rustic cabins are perfect for a secluded, information-highway-free break from the world.
- **Rancho Platón (p235)** – Get the kids away from the Xbox at this place, halfway down the mountain of the same name. There's horseback riding, dune buggies, a Ping-Pong table, trampoline, river tubing and a wicked, 25m water slide, all included in the price.
- **Villa Barrancoli (p239)** – Stalk the local endemics at this remote bird-watching camp on the north slope of the Sierra de Bahoruco. Bring your binoculars, and leave your consumer electronics at home.

Those seeking to leave the beaten path in the dust will be interested in the 14-day treks, which take you to some of the most remote and beautiful portions of the southwest, places that require several days' walk or mule-ride to get to. These run three to four times a year (usually Christmas, February and Easter), and aren't cheap, but they will give you a comprehensive survey of all the best of the southwest (including everything you'll read about in this book). Eco Tour Barahona also offers a number of shorter, three- to four-day trips, including one to Isla Beata and Alto Velo (see p238).

Tody Tours (☎ 809-686-0882; www.todytours.com; Santo Domingo) is the only bird-watching tour company based in the DR. The expatriate American owner lives in Santo Domingo but runs tours on demand to the southwest. She has more than 10 years' experience as a guide and charges US\$200 per day plus expenses; she organizes all transportation, food and accommodation for you. She prefers a minimum booking of a week. She also owns and runs a remote bird-watching camp, Villa Barrancoli (see p239).

BARAHONA

pop 78,000

Barahona is an unpleasant, industrial settlement of little interest to the traveler. Fortunately, though, a growing number of quality accommodation options have sprouted along the coastal road between here and Paraíso, making this a good base for exploring the region.

Barahona has the only ATMs for 100km and more, so you'll need to come here to get cash. It's also a necessary transfer point if you're traveling by bus.

History

By Dominican standards, Barahona is a young city, founded in 1802 by Haitian general L'Ouverture as a port to compete with Santo Domingo. For over a century, residents mostly made their living taking what they could from the Caribbean Sea, but today fishing accounts for only a small part of Barahona's economy. The dictator Rafael Trujillo changed everything when he ordered many square kilometers of desert north of town converted into sugarcane fields for his family's financial benefit. More than three decades after his assassination, the thousands of hectares of sugarcane continue to be tended, only now they are locally owned and benefit the community.

Orientation

The highway enters town from the west; after a large roundabout with a prominent square arch, it becomes Av Luís E Delmonte and Barahona's main drag. Av Delmonte continues straight as a sugarcane stalk downhill to the sea or, more exactly, to the seaside sugarcane refinery. From here, you can turn right or left onto Av Enriqueillo. Left leads to an industrial area; right is the continuation of the coastal highway, leading another 75km down the east coast of the peninsula.

An extensive network of industrial train-tracks once linked most of the country. There was never a passenger service and during the economic crash of the 1950s and 1960s the trains all but disappeared. Only one track remains: leading from the cane refinery several kilometers north of town to Barahona's port. If you walk down to water, you can't miss seeing it.

Information

Banco Popular (☎ 809-524-2102; cnr Calles Jaime Mota & Padre Billini) Right at Parque Central. Has a 24-hour ATM.

BanReservas (☎ 809-524-4006; cnr Av Uruguay & Calle Padre Billini) Around the corner from Banco Popular. Has a 24-hour ATM.

Centro Médico Regional Magnolia (☎ 809-524-2470; cnr Av Uruguay & Francisco Vázquez; ☎ 24hr emergency room) Medical services; serious cases generally get sent to Santo Domingo.

Codetel (☎ 809-220-7979; Av Uruguay; per hr US\$1) Internet access; also a call center.

Farmacia Dotel (☎ 809-524-2394; cnr Av Delmonte & Duverge) Pharmacy.

GigaNet (Mota at Montez; per hr US\$0.80) Biggest and best internet in town.

Sleeping

Unless you're after dirt-cheap budget accommodation, there's no reason to stay in the city itself (and even then...). Far better are the numerous hotels that string themselves along the coast south of Barahona on the road to Paraíso (see p234).

Hotel Cacique (☎ 809-524-4620; Av Uruguay 2; s with fan US\$11, s/d/tr with air-con US\$20/29/38; ☎) We don't reckon the *cacique* (headman of the tribe) would have stayed here. The rooms are clean enough, there's cable TV and hot water, but there are better-value air-con rooms elsewhere, and when the power goes out – which is almost always – the on-site generator makes a dreadful din.

Gran Hotel Barahona (☎ 809-524-2415; Calle Jaime Mota 5; s/d/tr/ste US\$27/36/43/47; P ☎) Masochists intent on staying in Barahona will want to stay here, the best-value option in town. Rooms are clean, with hot-water bathrooms and cable TV. Some of the mattresses are better than others, so ask to see a few if that's an important issue. The higher-priced rooms aren't much larger, but have nicer furnishings. The ones on the top floor have high, sloped ceilings. It's near Parque Central and several restaurants, banks and internet cafés.

Hotel Costa Larimar (☎ 809-524-5111; Av Enriqueillo 6; costalarimar@codetel.net.do; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$48/79/109/133; P ☎) The closest thing to an all-inclusive resort in the southwest, the Costa Larimar is at the southern end of town, with beach access and a pool with a swim-up bar. On the weekends it fills up with Dominicans from the capital, but during the week it echoes with emptiness. Basic price

includes breakfast, and an all-inclusive plan (per person US\$20) is available.

Eating

Restaurant Pizzeria D'Lina (☎ 809-524-3681; cnr Av 30 de Mayo & Calle Anacaona; mains US\$3-14; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Even with the chain pizza and chicken places down the street, this Barahona institution has a loyal clientele who come for good pies and friendly family service. Large pizzas start at around US\$10; there are also sandwiches and various meat, chicken and seafood dishes. Filling egg breakfasts go for around US\$4. Convenient location.

Los Robles (☎ 809-524-1629; cnr Nuestra Señora del Rosario & Av Enriqueillo; mains US\$3-16; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Among the best value in town for size, taste and price; you can have sit-down service at picnic tables on a pleasant outdoor patio, or order hefty grilled sandwiches from a stand-alone to-go shack. There's a little of something for everyone – including pizzas (US\$8 to US\$12), grilled beef and chicken plates (US\$9 to US\$11) and of course plenty of seafood (US\$10 to US\$16).

Ourpick Brisas del Caribe (☎ 809-524-2794; restbrisas@codetel.net.do; Av Enriqueillo 1; mains US\$8-18; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Add this restaurant to your list of essential services, somewhere after ATMs and before the medical clinic. It's one of the few reasons worth making the trip to Barahona (assuming you're already in the region). The kitchen offers some of the best seafood in the area – fresh, local sea creatures captured and cooked for your pleasure, as the seasons dictate. Set on a small rise about 500m north of Av Delmonte, the open-sided restaurant catches a cool breeze and most of the tables have a view of the green-blue Caribbean (and smoke stacks from nearby processing plants, but what can you do?).

Drinking

Los Robles (☎ 809-524-1629; cnr Nuestra Señora del Rosario & Av Enriqueillo; ☎ 9am-2am) and other nearby open-air restaurants are popular spots for a beer.

Entertainment

There is one disco in town – **Lotus** (cnr Calle Padre Billini & Nuestra Señora del Rosario; ☎ 7:30pm-2am Wed-Sun) – but the *puta* (prostitute) factor may be too high for some. For more wholesome, authentic Dominican party-time, check out the various no-name discos in Paraíso and Bahoruco.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Internacional María Montez (☎ 809-524-4144) is located 10km north of town. There were no commercial flights when we were there.

BUS

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-524-4952; Av Uruguay) has first-class service to Ázua (US\$2.15, one hour) and Santo Domingo (US\$6.70, 3½ hours) departing at 6:15am, 9:45am, 1:45pm and 5:15pm.

There is frequent *gua-gua* service to all points of the compass during daylight hours. All *gua-guas* leave from near the corner of Av Delmonte at Calle Padre Billini. You can also pick up south-bound *gua-guas* at a stop on the highway at the southern end of town. *Gua-guas* generally leave every 15 to 30 minutes during daylight hours.

There's frequent service to Santo Domingo (US\$6, 3½ hours; every 15 minutes from 4am), and plenty of *gua-guas* ply the route south and west along the coastal highway, passing through Paraíso (US\$1.80, 40 minutes) on the way to Pedernales (US\$5, two hours, until 3pm). *Gua-guas* head west to the border at Jimaní roughly every 45 minutes (US\$3.70, 2½ hours) until 3pm. It's also possible but difficult to visit Isla Cabritos via *gua-gua* – take any bus to Neyba (US\$2.40, 1¼ hours) and transfer for a La Descubierta-bound bus (US\$0.70, 40 minutes).

For San Juan de la Maguana, take any non-*expreso* Santo Domingo-bound *gua-gua* and get off at the Cruce del Quince (15km west of Ázua), and wait at the junction for a west-bound bus to San Juan (US\$3, 1½ hours). There are several small eateries if you missed breakfast, and you'll find a fair number of people waiting with you.

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-524-4952; Av Uruguay) has first-class service to Ázua (US\$2.15, one hour) and Santo Domingo (US\$6.70, 3½ hours) departing at 6:15am, 9:45am, 1:45pm and 5:15pm.

Getting Around

Barahona is somewhat spread out, though the area around the center is navigable by foot. For points further afield, taxis and *motoconchos* can be found beside the Parque Central and along Av Delmonte, or call the local **taxi asociación** (☎ 809-524-4003). If you want to go off-road, you may be able to hire a 4WD and driver by

contacting Eco Tour Barahona (p230), whose own stable of drivers occasionally freelance.

Don't take *motoconchos* after dark along the coastal road – that's just asking for trouble.

SOUTH OF BARAHONA Information

One of the few reliable places for internet outside of Barahona, **Guanaba.net** (Calle Duarte 35, La Ciénaga; www.guanaba.net; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-9:30pm Sun) has 10 computers with a good satellite link, plus a few headphones.

The **Internet Café de Paraíso** (Calle Arzobispo Noel; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-6pm), next to the market, has a few computers. For medical emergencies, there's the **Clinica Amor el Próximo** (☎ 809-243-1208; Calle Arzobispo Noel), also in Paraíso, with a doctor and nurse on call 24 hours per day.

Sights & Activities

BAHORUCO & LA CIÉNAGA

The adjoining seaside villages of Bahoruco and La Ciénaga are 17km south of Barahona, and are typical of the small communities along the east coast of the Península de Pedernales, with friendly local residents and a gravelly beach used more for mooring boats than bathing.

Especially in La Ciénaga, after dark almost any night of the week you're likely to find small, no-name *colmados* (small bars) and discos pumping the merengue out to the stars, and people drinking and dancing out of doors. If you decide to join them you'll likely be the only gringo in the place.

SAN RAFAEL

Three kilometers south of Bahoruco and La Ciénaga is the town of San Rafael (population 5300), notable for several awesome highway **vista points** on either side of town, and for Balneario San Rafael – natural and artificial **swimming holes** in the river, which are popular with local kids and families. You'll see one set of pools right alongside the highway – 100m north (downhill) from there is an unmarked dirt road leading to a second set of pools nearer the ocean. Fifty meters in the other direction, a steep paved road leads to **Villa Miriam** (☎ 8am-6pm; admission US\$5), another swimming area that has several natural pools (with some help from sandbags) and a regular swimming pool.

PARAÍSO

About 35km south of Barahona is the aptly named town of Paraíso (population 13,500),

with a spectacular beach and mesmerizing ocean – who knew there could be so many shades of blue?

Paraíso is a good budget alternative to Barahona, and is walking distance (or *moto-concho* distance) to the *balneario* (swimming hole) at Los Patos (see below). If you're driving, be sure to check out the *mirador* (lookout) just north of town – the views of the beach and ocean are jaw-dropping.

The **beach** directly in front of town has a fair amount of litter and numerous boats moored there. There are much better spots several hundred meters outside of town – follow the shady coastal road south and look for small paths through the brush. As elsewhere, much of the beach is covered in white stones, but there are several patches of fine sand where you can lay out a towel.

LOS PATOS

Several kilometers south of Paraíso is the hamlet of Los Patos, which is notable mostly for **Playa Los Patos**, a pretty white-stone beach, and for the adjacent *balneario*. Larger and more attractive than Balneario San Rafael, the water here flows clear and cool out of the mountainside, forming a shallow lagoon before running into the ocean. Small shacks serve good, reasonably priced food, making this a nice place to spend a couple of hours. On weekends it's crowded with Dominican families, but is much less busy midweek. There is a cave on the other side of the highway with what are supposedly Taino petroglyphs, but we have our doubts.

Sleeping & Eating

Given the overall sense of isolation in this part of the country, it makes sense that most of the hotels along the Barahona–Paraíso coastal highway also have their own restaurants, which are generally open to the public, and not just guests.

Note that we've listed the following hotels in geographical order as you go south from Barahona; restaurants are listed in geographical order at the end of the section.

Hotel Casablanca – Campo Suizo (☎ 809-471-1230, 829-975-5291; www.hotelcasablanca.com.do; Carretera Km 10, Juan Esteban; d/tr US\$35/40; 📍) This small, Swiss-owned B&B offers the most personalized style and service on this stretch of coast. Six simple but comfortable rooms are set on a well-tended garden. All rooms have a fan,

clean bathroom and either a king-size bed or a queen and twin. Fifty meters away, a beautiful curving cliff provides a dramatic view of the Caribbean, and stairs down one side lead to a narrow beach that's mostly rocky but has some nice sandy spots. There's a larger beach a 10-minute walk away. Breakfast (US\$7) isn't included, but it's one of the best breakfasts you'll have in the entire country. Ditto for dinner – even if you aren't staying here, consider phoning ahead in the morning to reserve a spot – the owner is an excellent cook.

our pick **Playazul** (☎ 809-454-5375; Carretera Km 7; s incl breakfast US\$36-46, d US\$55-64; 📍 📍 📍) 'Refined' is the key word at this new, French-run miniresort, easily the best-value hotel on the coast. Rooms are tastefully decorated and floored in blue tile, the beds comfortable and the shower has reliable hot water. The hotel is built on a bluff with great ocean views, and sturdy concrete slabs lead down to a pretty, private beach. Room price includes breakfast in the French-influenced restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$15) – worth visiting even if you're staying elsewhere – where the chef's specialty is anything with shrimp. The *crêpes de camarones* (US\$7) are especially good, and make a great light meal.

Hotel Pontevedra (☎ 809-341-8462; www.pontevedracaribe.com; Carretera Km 15; s/d/tr incl breakfast & dinner US\$33/64/70; 📍 📍 📍) Four kilometers north of Bahoruco is this Dominican-run semi-all-inclusive hotel. Each of the 16 self-contained apartments is spacious, if not the cleanest, has a sofa, coffee table, and a kitchen with two electric burners, sink, fridge, and a small breakfast bar. The restaurant (mains US\$8 to US\$14) is open to the public – although we can't recommend the food. There are two pools, one for the kiddies, and steps lead down to a yellow pebble beach. Popular with Dominicans.

Casa Bonita (☎ 809-476-5059; www.casabonitadr.com; Carretera Km 17; r incl breakfast US\$130 Sun-Thu, US\$170 Fri & Sat; 📍 📍 📍 📍) Formerly the vacation retreat of a wealthy Dominican family, Casa Bonita is set on a hill overlooking the north end of Bahoruco. It is easily the most expensive hotel in the southwest, and the restaurant (mains US\$7 to US\$22) arguably one of the best. Under renovation when we were there, the 12 rooms – six with king-size beds, six with two full-size beds – were being redone in coral stone, and balconies have been added to all the rooms (which

CACHÓTE – FOGGY MOUNTAIN BREAKDOWN

About 25km (1½ hours' drive) west of Paraíso on an impressively bad road – you ford the same river half a dozen times – sit the remote cabins of **Cachóte**. At 1400m you're in the heart of Caribbean cloud forest. It's here that seven rivers spring from the ground to supply the coastal towns below.

In order to protect the water supply, coffee growing was ended in the 1990s, and today, with the help of Peace Corps volunteers, cabins have been constructed and short trails built in the regenerating forest. More cabins are planned, and at Easter time you may well stumble upon a swarm of volunteers from the University of Dayton, Ohio building them.

The cabins themselves are rustic but comfortable, and each has one large queen-size bed and a triple-decker dormitory-style bunk. Prices include accommodation, pickup from Barahona or Paraíso, three Dominican-style meals and Spanish-speaking guide, and are skewed toward large groups – one to four people pay US\$100 per person per night, dropping to US\$50 per person per night for groups of five to nine, and US\$33 per person per night for groups of 10 to 20. Be sure to give them at least two weeks' notice that you're coming. Contact **Ecoturismo Comunitario Cachóte** (☎ 809-899-4702; soepa.paraíso@yahoo.com).

Eco Tour Barahona (p230) also runs a day trip to Cachóte (US\$70), stopping at the small communities along the way. You'll pass from dry coastal plains up through a large coffee-, citrus- and mango-growing region into cloud forest at the top.

Unless you're a professional off-road rally driver we don't recommend trying to drive here yourself. Those sufficiently foolhardy, however, should look for the turnoff in the village of La Ciénega (see p233). There is no sign but it's the only road leading west into the mountains.

are otherwise a bit small). The tropical-themed bar and restaurant suggests colonial Malaysia under the British, and the food is Asian/fusion – think tuna steak with soy sauce and ginger (US\$17). There's an 'infinity' pool, Jacuzzi, free wi-fi, and fridges in the rooms.

Coral Sol Resort (☎ 809-233-4882; www.coralresort.com; Carretera Km 21, south end of La Ciénega; 📍 📍) This small resort has 10 large cabins, each with two double beds and two bathrooms, set on a tree-filled hillside sloping down to a pebbly beach protected from the pounding sea by a rocky strip. It's ideal for families – rooms aren't particularly lavish so there's nothing for kids to break, and the restaurant's focus is on quantity, not quality, so the rugrats can fling spaghetti at the wall to their hearts' delight. Three of the cabins have a good ocean view – ask for one of these. Prices include all meals: for one person US\$65, two people US\$55 each, three or more people US\$45 each. A breakfast-only plan is available.

Rancho Platón (☎ 809-683-1836; per person all-inclusive US\$75; 📍 📍) Owned by a wealthy Dominican family and managed by Eco Tours Barahona, this rustic country retreat sits about 7km west of Paraíso on a rough road that crosses several rivers. A 20m-high waterfall drops right next to the main building, where

an artificial pool has been built. There are enormous stands of bamboo, and ducks and guinea hens wander about. Perfect for families, the price includes all the horseback riding, tubing (down to Paraíso beach, no less), hiking, 25m-high water sliding, dune buggying and Ping-Pong playing you can handle. There are five double rooms for the adults, and a smaller adjacent building offers dorms for the kids. There's no phone or internet, and a small hydro generator produces power from the adjacent waterfall. Minimum group size of six. Transportation included in price. Bring mosquito repellent.

Hotel Paraíso (☎ 809-243-1080; Carretera Km 34, Paraíso, c/r Av Gregorio Luperón & Calle Doña Chin; r with fan US\$15-21, with air-con US\$25; 📍 📍) This small hotel in the center of Paraíso offers the best budget digs on the coast. It's an easy walk to the area's best beaches. The rooms themselves are fairly spacious, but are otherwise nothing special – some have air-con and TV, and most have bathtubs. Those on the top floor have peaked ceilings. There is a pool but it was empty when we were there. Be sure to call ahead – Habitat for Humanity sometimes does projects in Paraíso, and books out the entire hotel.

Hotelito Oasi Italiana (☎ 829-918-6969; www.lospa.com; Carretera Km 37, Los Patos, Calle José Carrasco; mains US\$7-14; 📍 📍 📍) While this Italian-owned

hotel does offer a few rooms (singles/doubles including breakfast US\$36/46), the real star of the show here is the food. It's not gourmet, but simple food, well prepared – fresh fish, soups, salads, even homemade polenta (the owner/chef is from Verona). Set on a rise a few hundred meters from the beach, the restaurant has great views over the sea – a choice spot to sit with an iced martini, catching those cooling breezes and watching the sun set. Additional rooms were under construction when we were there, but the ones already built were poorly thought out – come for the food, stay somewhere else.

Restaurante Luz (☎ 809-630-9861; mains US\$5-9; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the coastal road in the adjoining villages of Bahoruco and La Ciénaga, this good option has a tidy 2nd-floor dining room overlooking the shore, and a nice ocean breeze. Seafood is the main option here, including grilled fish and *lambi* (conch). All dishes come with rice and beans.

Sea View (☎ 809-243-1045; Malecón; mains US\$15-25; ☺ lunch & dinner) One of a couple of good options in Paraíso, Sea View faces the ocean. The menu is fish, fresh and well prepared. This place also does a paella and a *cazuela de mariscos* (seafood stew).

Getting There & Away

The *gua-gua* stop in Paraíso is on the highway at Calle Enriqueillo, 1km uphill from the beach. From here you can get buses to Barahona (US\$1.80, 40 minutes, every 25 minutes), and south-bound *gua-guas* to Enriqueillo (US\$1.30, 15 minutes), Laguna Oviedo (US\$1.80, 45 minutes) and Pedernales (US\$3.50, 1½ hours) pass by roughly every 15 minutes. A Santo Domingo-bound express bus from Pedernales passes through here at around 4am (US\$8, four hours).

LARIMAR MINE

All larimar in the DR – and, indeed, the world – comes from this one mine. Discovered in 1974 by Miguel Méndez, the name comes from Larissa (Méndez's daughter) plus *mar* (sea). Its scientific name is blue pectolite.

The mining operations are done not by a large mining concern but by a small collective of individual miners. You can visit the mines and even go down some of the mine shafts. A small group of basic shacks sells cut-rate larimar jewelry at the mine, and a few no-name eateries sell food and drink to the miners.

The tunnels had collapsed and the road was washed out when we were there (after Tropical Storm Noel), but by the time you get there things should be back to normal.

To get there, look for the turnoff in the small hamlet of El Arroyo, 13km south of Barahona (3km north of Bahoruco). It's an hour's drive on a rough SUV-only road. Eco Tour Barahona (p230) offers a tour here (US\$70). Alternatively, take a *gua-gua* to the turnoff early in the morning; you may be able to hitchhike in with one of the miners.

A Peace Corps volunteer was attempting to organize a community-driven tour to the mine and local workshops when we were there; these may well be up and running by the time you read this. Contact the **Asociación de Artesanos de Bahoruco** (☎ 829-633-8018; larimarexperience@gmail.com).

ENRIQUILLO

pop 13,500

Fifteen kilometers south of Paraíso (and 54km south of Barahona) is this typical Dominican town, which is notable for having the last two hotels and gas station until Pedernales, some 82km away. There is no ATM.

PARQUE NACIONAL JARAGUA

The **Parque Nacional Jaragua** (admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50; ☺ 8am-5pm) is the largest protected area in the country. Its 1400 sq km include vast ranges of thorn forest and subtropical dry forest and an extensive marine area that spans most of the southern coastline, including Laguna Oviedo, Bahía de Las Águilas, and the islands of Isla Beata and Alto Velo.

Laguna Oviedo

This hypersaline lake, separated from the ocean by a thin 800m-wide strip of sand, is a popular bird-watching destination, and home to a small colony of flamingos, which swells in population during winter. You're also likely to spot ibis, stork and spoonbills, especially in late spring and early summer. The enormous, one-ton *tinjlare* turtle comes here from April to June to lay and hatch its eggs, but can only be seen very late at night.

A new visitors center has been built at the entrance, plus two viewing platforms – one at the shore, another on the biggest of the 24 or so islands in the lake, where you'll also find lots of big, beefy iguanas. So salty

WHERE TO FIND THE BLUE STUFF

There are two good artisan shops selling handmade larimar jewelry along the coastal road. The first, **C & A Larimar Gift Shop**, is located just off the main coastal highway as you drive south, about 17km south of Barahona, near Bahoruco. It's just before the little baseball diamond, not far from Casa Bonita.

The other, **Vanessa's Gift Shop**, is along the beachside road that goes through Bahoruco and La Ciénaga. Once you enter Bahoruco on the main highway, you'll pass the baseball diamond, cross a bridge and there will be a road that goes to your left along the beach (there's a small sign that says 'Bahoruco'). Follow that road to the beach for a half-mile, pass the Restaurant Luz on your left, and you'll come to the gift shop on your right.

In addition to the handmade larimar jewelry they both have for sale, for an additional US\$15 they'll admit you to their workshop out back and let you make your own larimar souvenir. An artisan will use a wet saw to cut a general shape to your taste, then guide you in shaping and polishing the stone.

Beachcombers may also find their own larimar stones on the beach. The river that runs near the mine meets the sea at Playa Bahoruco, a short walk from town. After heavy rains especially, there's a good chance you'll find a larimar stone or two washed up onto the sand.

is the lake that in the dry season you'll see crystallized salt mixed with the sand on the islands.

You can take a boat tour from the **visitors center** (☎ 829-305-1686, or Areas Protegidas in Santo Domingo 809-472-4204; ☺ 8:30am-4pm). A two-hour tour costs US\$60 per boat (up to 10 people), a Spanish-speaking guide costs US\$10, plus there's the national park entrance fee (Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50). The tour includes a brief visit to a small Taíno cave, plus a short walk across the dividing strip to the ocean and the beach there, a beautiful yellow strand marred by an unbelievable quantity of plastic flotsam and jetsam – broken buckets, empty bleach bottles and the occasional light bulb. Wear shoes.

Eco Tour Barahona (p230) offers a day trip here (US\$70). It is also considering starting a late-night turtle watching tour in springtime – worth asking about.

There's a well-marked entrance to the park and lagoon off the coastal highway about 3km north of the town of Oviedo. Oviedo and Pedernales buses can drop you at the park entrance. The last bus back to Barahona passes by around 4pm, but try not to cut it that close.

Bahía de Las Águilas

Bahía de Las Águilas is a pristine and extremely remote beach in the far southwestern corner of the DR. It's not on the way to anything else, and getting there is something of an adventure, but those who do make it

are rewarded with 10km of nearly deserted beach forming a slow arc between two prominent capes.

To get there, take the dirt road turnoff to Cabo Rojo, about 12km east of Pedernales. The Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) used to mine bauxite here (a key ingredient for aluminum), and even though a new company has taken over, this is still called 'the Alcoa road.' You'll pass huge mountains of bauxite ore along the way – do drive carefully, as the road is used mainly by huge, fast-moving dump trucks.

You'll reach the town of Cabo Rojo after 6km, and a tiny fishing community called Las Cuevas 3km after that. Note the namesake cave in the middle of the settlement – fishing folk used to live inside it, and now store their fishing gear there. There are two ways to get to Las Águilas from here. One is to have a really good 4WD (and a driver with significant off-road experience) and attempt to drive there on a steep, pockmarked track through the coastal cactus forest.

The far more relaxing, enjoyable alternative is to go on a boat tour run by the owner of the restaurant **Rancho Tipico** (☎ 809-474-3408, 809-753-8058; rodriguezsantiago3@hotmail.com; mains US\$10-15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) in Las Cuevas. Prices are as follows: for groups of one to five, US\$46 per boat; six to eight, US\$9 per person; nine to 12, US\$8 per person; 13 to 30, US\$6 per person; 30 to 35, US\$5 per person. He also rents goggles and fins (at outrageous prices) so you can go 'snorkling' – groups of one to

five, US\$150; six to eight, US\$30 per person; nine to 12, US\$25 per person. Bring your own snorkeling gear if at all possible. You'll also need to pay the national park entrance fee (Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50).

Eco Tour Barahona (p230) runs a day trip here (US\$70). It organizes all the logistics, picks you up and drops you off at your hotel, supplies lunch, and can show you where the best corals are to go snorkeling.

A small tourist center was being built by the Pedernales guide association (AGUINAPE; see right) when we passed through. Several kilometers south of the turnoff on the Alcoa road, you'll come to a fork in the road. The better road turns left and inland (the normal route to Las Cuevas). Continue straight east for a few kilometers and you'll come to it. The association plans to rent snorkeling gear (US\$5 per day), tents (US\$10 per day), coolers with ice (US\$5 per day), beach chairs (US\$2 per day) and life jackets (US\$2 per day). They can also provide transport here from Pedernales if you're coming by *gua-gua*.

There's a very small shelter (little larger than a phone booth) on the beach, but otherwise no facilities. Camping is permitted, but be sure to bring plenty of water, food and insect repellent, and take your garbage out with you. A national park visitors center was planned, and there were rumors the road would be paved. We sincerely hope not – part of the beauty here lies in its remoteness.

ISLA BEATA & ALTO VELO

These are end-of-the-world spots, difficult to access but seductive because of their remoteness. They are challenging for independent travelers to visit, and can be enjoyed more fully by taking a tour.

Isla Beata, once home to a prison for political dissidents under the dictatorship of Trujillo in the 1950s, remains under joint management of the military and the Parque Nacional Jaragua. The small fishing village of **Trudille** sits directly on **Playa Blanca**, a 40km-long white sand beach full of iguanas. The prison was destroyed after Trujillo's assassination but you can still visit the ruins.

Alto Velo is a smaller, uninhabited island 1½ hours further south of Isla Beata. It's the southernmost point in the DR. Windswept and covered in bird droppings (from the swarms of seagulls that live there), there's a lighthouse at the highest point of the island

(250m). It's a two-hour return walk (about 2.5km each way) with amazing views. There's no beach though.

The best way to visit the islands is to take a tour with Eco Tours Barahona (p230), which offers a three-day trip (US\$460 per person, minimum six) that includes a night at both Bahía de Las Águilas and Isla Beata. An extra day (US\$120 per person) can be tacked on if you also want to visit Alto Velo.

PEDERNALES

pop 14,000

The coastal highway dead-ends in Pedernales. There's no road here to Haiti, nor border post, and is principally of interest to those wanting to linger at Bahía de Las Águilas or in the national parks nearby. There are several quite acceptable places to lay your head for the night, and the seafood you'll eat in the local restaurants comes fresh off the boat.

With the help of a local Peace Corps volunteer and a World Bank grant, a small guide association is just getting on its feet. The **Asociación de Guías de Naturaleza de Pedernales** (AGUINAPE; ☎ 809-214-1575; www.nuestrafrontera.org/aguinape) will be of most interest to travelers without their own vehicles, as the group can organize transport to and from both Bahía de Las Águilas and Hoyo de Pelempito (US\$15 each way). The guides are enthusiastic (if not yet supremely knowledgeable) and can discuss the local flora and fauna along the way (per day/half-day US\$24/18). They were building a small tourist center off the main road to Las Águilas when we passed through, from which they plan to rent camping equipment, snorkeling gear, beach umbrellas etc.

The well-recommended **Hostal Doña Chava** (☎ 809-524-0332; hostalchava@hotmail.com; Calle 2, BarRío Alcoa; s/tr with fan US\$12/17, s/d/tr with air-con US\$18/21/23; 📍 🚻) offers clean, simple rooms with tidy bathrooms and cable TV. There's a pleasant patio out back, and breakfast (US\$3) is available.

You wouldn't expect to find such grandmotherly accommodation as **Hostal D'Óleo Méndez** (☎ 809-524-0416; Calle Antonio Duvergé; s with fan US\$14, s/d with air-con US\$24/30; 📍 🚻) in what is, really, the middle of nowhere, but the D'Óleo Méndez offers just that. Sixteen of the rooms have aircon and TV, and it offers cheap Dominican lunch specials (US\$3). It has a secure parking lot just a block down.

There are a couple of good seafood restaurants in town. **King Crab** (☎ 809-256-9607; Calle Dominguez 2; mains US\$3-15; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) and **Jalicar** (☎ 809-524-0350; Calle Libertad; mains US\$3-15; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) are both recommended.

BanReservas (☎ 809-524-0549; Calle Duarte) has the only ATM in town, but it empties out fast, especially on weekends.

Gua-guas go back and forth between Pedernales and Barahona (US\$4.25, two hours, hourly from 2am to 3pm).

PARQUE NACIONAL SIERRA DE BAHORUCO

This **national park** (admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50; 🕒 8am-5pm) directly west of Barahona covers 800 sq km of mostly mountainous terrain and is notable for the rich variety of vegetation that thrives in its many different climates, from lowland desert to cloud forest. Valleys are home to vast areas of broad-leafed plants, which give way to healthy pine forests at higher elevations. In the mountains the average temperature is 18°C, and annual rainfall is between 1000mm and 2500mm.

Within the national park there are 166 orchid species, representing 52% of the country's total. Thirty-two percent of those species are endemic to the park. Flitting about among the park's pine, cherry and mahogany trees are 49 species of bird. These include the white-necked crow, which can only be seen on Hispaniola. The most common birds in the mountains are La Selle's thrush, white-winged warblers, Hispaniolan trogons and narrow-billed todies. At lower elevations, look for white-crowned pigeons, white-winged doves, Hispaniolan parakeets, Hispaniolan lizard cuckoos and Hispaniolan parrots.

Tody Tours runs a bird-watching camp near Puerto Escondido called **Villa Barrancoli** (☎ 809-686-0882; www.todytours.com; Santo Domingo; camping US\$2-10, food per day US\$20 per group). When the camp is not otherwise in use independent travelers are welcome – be sure to give several days' notice. You'll want a good 4WD (and know how to use it). To get there from Barahona, head to the town of Duvergé along the southern side of Lago Enriquillo. In town, turn left on an unmarked road about three corners after the gas station. Follow this to Puerto Escondido (30 minutes). You'll see

the **park office** (no phone; admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50) on your right as you enter. Continue to a 'T' intersection, then turn left, following the sign to Rabo de Gato. Turn right and cross the canal. At the next fork turn right again and follow the signs to Rabo de Gato until you come to the campsite.

Hoyo de Pelempito

Part of Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco, the 'hole' at Pelempito is actually a deep gorge formed when the Península de Pedernales jammed itself up into Hispaniola umpteen million years ago. The brand-new visitors center, perched on the edge of a cliff at 1450m, offers breathtaking views, north and east, of completely untouched national park. The cliff itself is a 600m drop.

The visitors center has information (in Spanish) on the various flora and fauna in the area, and a number of short nature walks have small signs identifying the various plants. Serious bird-watchers scoff that this is a poor bird-watching location, but for the casual tourist the views make it worth the drive.

Pelempito sits on the south side of the Sierra de Bahoruco. The road to get here is ridiculously well paved by Dominican standards. The turnoff is about 12km east of Pedernales, before the road to Bahía de Las Águilas. You'll come to a **ranger station** (☎ no phone; admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50) about halfway up the mountain. Eventually the highway-like road turns into a rutted, 4WD track. It's about 30km (1½hrs) from the turnoff.

POLO

pop 9500

The small town of Polo, nestled on the south slopes of the Sierra de Bahoruco, is the center of a major coffee- and vegetable-growing region. It's principally famous for the optical illusion on the highway 20km north of town (see p240), and more recently for the **Festival de Café Orgánico**, which happens on the first weekend of June (see the boxed text, p240).

From Barahona, drive 12km west to Cabral and look for the unmarked southbound turnoff in the middle of town (where all the *motoconchos* hang out). From there it's about a 30km (45-minute) drive to Polo.

THE POLO ORGANIC COFFEE FESTIVAL

Started in 2004, the **Festival de Café Orgánico de Polo** (☎ 809-682-3877; www.festicafe.org) is held on the first weekend in June. From Friday to Sunday, local coffee growers celebrate the end of the coffee-harvesting season. There's live merengue and *bachata* in the evenings, and during the day stands sell coffee and typical southwestern arts and crafts. There's a 'coffee parade,' and lots of (decaffeinated) games for the kids. The organizers also lead hiking trips to remote coffee plantations in the mountains.

There's no real hotel in town, but during the festival the organizers can put you up in a spare room in someone's house – be sure to call several weeks ahead, as rooms fill up fast. You can also drive out from Barahona; it's about an hour each way.

POLO MAGNÉTICO

Twelve kilometers west of Barahona is the town of Cabral and the turnoff for the town of Polo. About 10kms south from the turnoff you'll encounter a famous mirage. Put your car in neutral, let go of the brake and watch your car get 'pulled' uphill. The effect is best between the towns of El Lechoso and La Cueva, and works on a smaller scale, too – get out of the car and put a water bottle on the road. It, too, will show a mysterious desire to climb uphill.

NORTH OF PEDERNALES

LAGO ENRIQUILLO & ISLA CABRITOS

Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos (☎ 809-996-3649; admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50; ☎ 7am-5pm) is named after the 12km-long desert island in the center of Lago Enriquillo, an enormous saltwater lake 40m below sea level. The lake is the remains of an ancient channel that once united the Bahía de Neyba to the southeast (near Barahona) with Port-au-Prince to the west. The accumulation of sediments deposited by the Río Yaque del Sur at the river's mouth on the Bahía de Neyba, combined with an upward thrust of a continental plate, gradually isolated the lake. Today it is basically a 200-sq-km inland sea.

The park includes, oddly, just the island, and not the rest of the lake, where fishermen cast nets for tilapia, an introduced fish. The highlights are the lake's creatures, including an estimated 200 American crocodiles that can be seen at the edge of the lake. From December to April you'll also see flamingos and egrets.

The island, which varies in elevation from 40m to 4m below sea level, is a virtual desert,

supporting a variety of cacti and other desert flora. In summer, temperatures of 50°C have been recorded – go early. It is home to Ricord iguanas and rhinoceros iguanas, some more than 20 years old and considerably beefier than most house cats. The island also has lots of scorpions, not to mention plenty of cacti, so wear covered shoes if possible.

There is a small **visitors' center** on the island, with information on the history and geology of the island. From March to June you'll see a blooming of cactus flowers, and June sees a small swarm of butterflies.

The **park entrance** is about 3km east of La Descubierta. A boat tour of the park costs US\$110 for up to eight people – expect a sore, wet bum (and salt stains). Be sure to call ahead – if a tour group has the boat reserved, you might be out of luck (although if there's empty spaces they'll usually let you join for US\$35 per person). The boat will take you to the mouth of the Río de la Descubierta – where the most crocodiles and flamingos are visible – and Isla Cabritos. The tour usually lasts one to two hours. Bring a hat and plenty of water.

A short distance east of the park entrance, look for **Las Caritas** (The Masks). On the north side of the highway, brightly painted green and yellow handrails lead up to a small rock overhang with what are believed to be pre-Taíno petroglyphs. A short but somewhat tricky climb up the hillside – you'll need shoes or decent sandals – affords a close look at the pictures and a fine view of the lake. Very little is known about the meaning of the figures. Note that much of the rock here is actually petrified coral, remnants of the time the entire area was under the sea.

If you're driving, be sure to stop at the junction at the southeast corner of the lake to check out the statue, 'Monumento del Cacique.'

Nearly 500 years ago, somewhere in the Sierra de Bahoruco, the Taíno chief Enriquillo chose to fight the conquistadores. The battle raged off and on for 14 years – from 1519 to 1533 – during which time the Spaniards came to respect the *cacique* and finally made peace with him. The chief declared a small free republic in the highest reaches of the Sierra de Bahoruco. The statue honors these deeds with the words, chiseled in stone, 'the first cry of freedom for the whole continent.'

Eco Tour Barahona (p230) offers a popular day trip to Isla Cabritos (US\$70), including a visit to Las Caritas, the Haitian market at Jimaní, and the swimming hole at La Descubierta.

Sleeping & Eating

About 3kms west of the park entrance lies the small town of La Descubierta, which is popular for its large swimming hole right in the middle of town. There's not much reason to spend the night here, but if you get stuck, the **Hotel Iguana** (☎ 809-301-4815; d/tw US\$10/20; ☎) on the main road west of the park will do in a pinch. Rooms are small and simple, but also clean and quiet. Three rooms have air-con, but are stuffer than the fan-cooled ones, which have private bathrooms and surprisingly comfortable beds. The Iguana's friendly proprietor prepares excellent home-cooked meals, but needs a day's notice. Otherwise, there are **food shacks** in town, near the park and swimming hole.

Getting There & Away

You're better off driving if you're coming out this way, but you can also grab a *gua-gua* from Barahona to Neyba, and then change for any west-bound *gua-gua* to the ranger station. Be sure to tell the driver that that's where you want to go, or he'll drive right past it.

JIMANÍ

pop 6700

This dusty border town is on the most direct route between Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince, and is therefore the busiest of the three official border crossings. Dominicans from as far away as Santo Domingo come here for the Monday and Friday markets, where they can buy humanitarian aid (giant sacks of rice and beans and jugs of cooking oil), meant for Haitians, at rock-bottom prices. There are also a few *tiendas* selling Haitian beer (Prestige)

and rum (Rhum Barbancourt), both arguably better than their Dominican counterparts. The market is just past the Dominican border post in no-man's-land.

A hurricane in 2004 destroyed the La Cuarenta neighborhood, killing more than 800 people. Today you can see hundreds of small, new cinderblock houses erected to house the surviving population.

For information on crossing the border see p256.

Information

BanReservas (☎ 809-248-3373) has a 24-hour ATM and is at the west end of Calle 19 de Marzo, the main road from Neyba just before it leaves town for the Haitian border. **Farmacia Marian** (☎ 809-248-3304; ☎ 8am-10pm) is on the uphill road to/from Duvergé.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Jimaní (☎ 809-248-3139; Calle 19 de Marzo 2; r US\$23; ☎) On the right side of the road as you enter town from La Descubierta, Jimaní's best hotel looks a little like a small high school, but is surprisingly comfortable. Each of the 10 rooms has both a twin and queen-size bed, plus cable TV and a private cold-water bathroom. The hotel is showing its age and the bathrooms could stand to be remodeled, but this is much better than you'd expect for a border town.

The hotel has a somewhat popular **restaurant** (☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner). Otherwise, the eating options are slim, limited to several small, forgettable eateries along the road to Duvergé.

Getting There & Away

Jimaní is served by *gua-guas* from Santo Domingo, passing La Descubierta, Neyba and Baní along the way; and from Barahona via Duvergé and the south side of Lago Enriquillo. Both bus stops are on the dusty sloping road that enters town from the Duvergé side. The Santo Domingo route has a proper terminal near the bottom of the hill (US\$9, five hours, every 30 to 45 minutes from 1am to 5pm). For La Descubierta, it's US\$1.30 and takes 30 minutes. *Gua-guas* to Barahona (US\$4.25, two hours, every 45 minutes from 4am to 3pm) leave from a shady corner about 200m up the hill, across from a small supermarket. Caribe Tours has a direct service from Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince, with a stop in Jimaní (see p102).

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