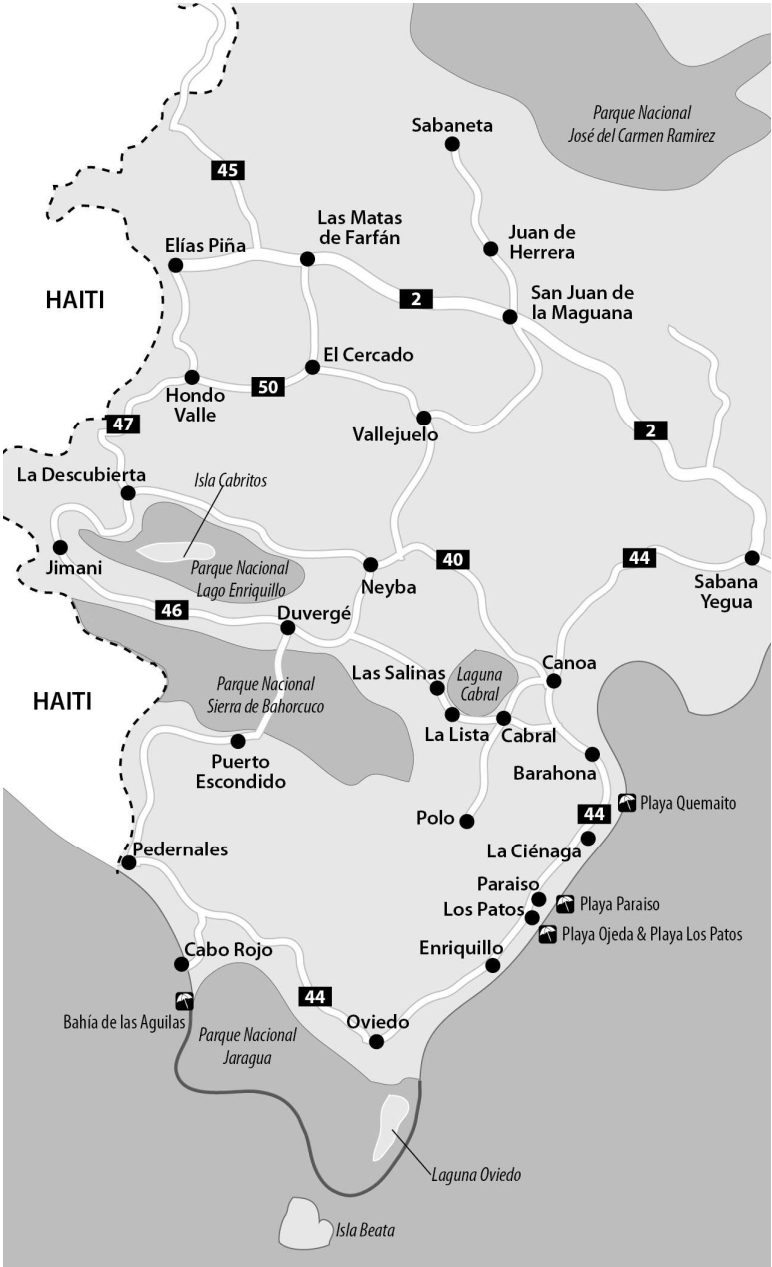


The South

Overlooked and underappreciated by many of the millions of visitors that arrive in the country each year, El Sur, as it is referred to locally, is the hidden gem of the Dominican Republic. This sprawling and vibrant region offers astounding geographic variety and biodiversity: the cool, coniferous mountains of the Sierra de Ocoa, the dusty, arid lands around Azua, the turquoise waters of Barahona's pebble beaches, and the humid forests in the Sierra de Bahoruco. Don't leave without purchasing some *larimar* – a blue semi-precious stone found nowhere else in the world but the hills of the Sierra de Bahoruco – and be sure to sample the local culinary favorites, such as *chenchen* (a moist, salty cornmeal bread), found in places like San Juan de la Maguana. Environmentalists swoon over the abundant wildlife found at Lago Enriquillo, the Caribbean's largest saltwater lake, and birdwatchers find their mecca in Puerto Escondido. The flourishing coral reefs around Bahía de las Águilas are perfect for divers, and beachgoers love the isolated, white sand beaches of this starkly beautiful National Park.

The roads in the South are not in terribly good condition, making a four-wheel drive vehicle a good investment if renting a car. In general, however, the region is well connected by public transportation. The greatest draw of the South is the warmth and humility of its people, virtually unaffected by the ills of unsustainable tourism. The South's relative inaccessibility and lack of government attention have left room for something of a silver lining in the growth of more sustainable forms of development. Environmentally aware eco- and agro-tourism companies and community-based cooperatives are popping up throughout the region. These movements will hopefully allow the South to pass by the disruptive tourism booms and crashes seen in other parts of the country, while protecting its cultural and environmental heritage.





San Cristóbal

The province of San Cristóbal, home to over 220,000 inhabitants, is comprised of a variety of microclimates in its small area, from the cool and humid coffee-carpeted mountains in the north, to the sunny, stone-dotted beaches of Palenque and Najayo in the south. Manmade creations such as the well-stocked Valdesia Dam attract fishing fanatics, but all visitors can marvel at the resplendent mountain views along the small village byways. A number of cave systems including the Cuevas de Pomier (or Borbón), covered in pictographs, offer glimpses of the indigenous civilizations' way of life. While adventurous travelers will see the great potential throughout the province, the city of San Cristóbal requires a bit more imagination. Famous for being the birthplace of Trujillo, the city is a tangled mess of motorcycles and *guaguas*, destroying pleasant strolls in their wake. There are, however, a few interesting sights: Trujillo's mansions, El Cerro, and the abandoned Casa de Caoba. These paired with a decadent meal at Aubergine (pg 299) make for the perfect day trip from Santo Domingo, as San Cristóbal is less than an hour's drive from the capital.

TRANSPORT

From Santo Domingo: RD\$70; 6am-8pm; 45 min.; *Guaguas* (Rutas A and B) leave from Parque Enriqueillo along C/ Duarte and from Parque Independencia along C/ Bolívar. Both Ruta A and B pass through the center of San Cristóbal.

From Santo Domingo to Palenque: RD\$100; 7am-6pm; 1 hr.; *Guaguas* to Palenque run along C/ Bolívar in Gascue, but originates from Parque Enriqueillo.

From San Cristóbal to Palenque: RD\$40; 7am-6pm; 20 min.; The *parada* for Palenque in San Cristóbal is on C/ Padre Borbón across from Parque Radhamés.

El Mercado de San Cristóbal: Prices vary; *Guaguas* leaving from San Cristóbal towards La Toma, Las Cuevas de Pomier, La Colonia, Cambita, Los Cacaos and many other small towns and villages leave from the lively Mercado Público. Ruta A or B will drop you off at the entrance to the *mercado*, where it's possible to ask a local where specific *parada* locations are within the *mercado*.

Motoconchos around town start at RD\$20 a trip.

INFO

Medical Attention

Unless it's an absolute emergency, head to Santo Domingo for medical attention. As a last resort, the public **Hospital Juan Pablo Piña** is at 42 C/Santomé and C/ Presidente Billini (528-3098). For pharmacy necessities, **Farmacia Gladys Rosa** is on the corner of C/ Dr. Briosso and Padre Ayala (528-3291).

Communication

On C/ Sánchez near the corner of C/General Cabral is an **Internet Café**. The **Post Office** is located at 188 Av. Constitución (528-1176; 910-6038).

Banks

There are numerous full-service banks in the center of town including a **Banco Popular** (corner of Av. Constitución and C/Palo Hincado; 528-4335), a **Banco BHD**

(corner of Av. Constitución and C/Salcedo; 528-6262) and a **Banco León** (corner of Av. Constitución and C/Dr. Brioso; 476-2000/ 200-8242). All are open Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4pm and Saturday 9am to 1pm.

Police

The local station of the **Policia Nacional** is found on Av. Constitución & C/Sánchez.

Gas

There is an **Esso Gas Station** across from Parque Radhamés along C/ Padre Borbón, as well as an **Isla Gas Station** continuing a few meters west past the Mercado Modelo on C/ Padre Borbón.

Grocery Stores

For the largest selection of food and many other items, **La Sirena** is located on Carretera Sánchez Vieja and Los Padres (338-0909).

EAT



Aubergine Jutting out from a mountainside overlooking the peaks and valleys of San Cristóbal, this avant-garde restaurant fuses Asian, German, and other flavors to create a multi-layered journey for the taste buds. Try any of the German chef's ever-changing inventions with exotic meats or one of the namesake dishes, such as fried eggplant roulettes topped with *chili con carne*, a terrific blend of Mexican and Thai. The desserts are equally imaginative: white chocolate avocado ice cream topped with eye-catching fresh strawberry sauce and poppy seeds. *RD\$280-780; La Colonia Km 6 ½ past Cambita en route to Los Cacaos; 374-1382, 729-9364; harald@codetel.net.do; www.aubergine.com.do. For public transport either take a carro público (RD\$40; 15 min.) to Cambita from the Mercado in San Cristóbal, and then a motoconcho (RD\$100; 15 min.) to the restaurant or take a guagua (RD\$50; 30 min.) going to Los Cacaos, which also leaves from the Mercado. Tell the cobrador to leave you at Aubergine (where the German is – "donde el aleman") in La Colonia.*

A Local Favorite

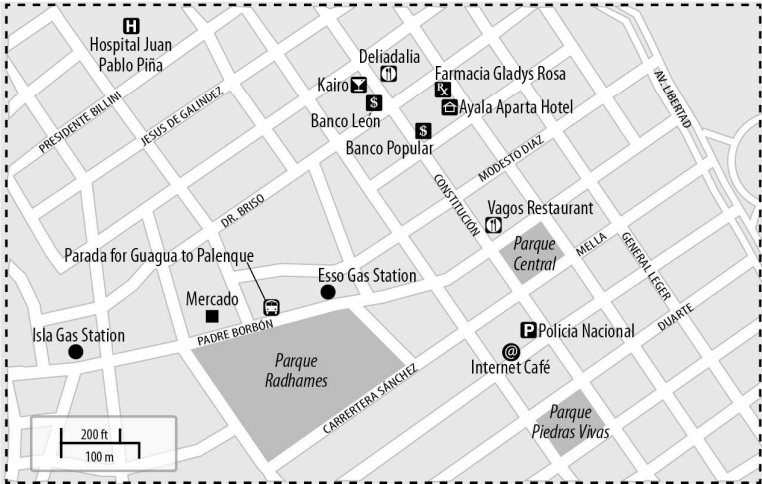
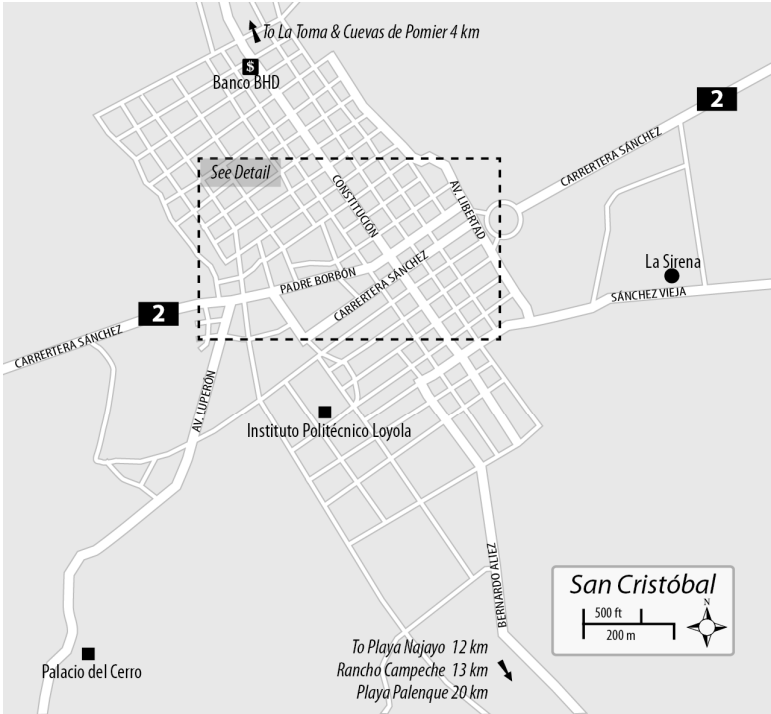
Eggplant is a favorite side dish in Dominican cuisine, often in the form of *berenjena guisado* (eggplant stewed in vegetables and spices). The fruit, however, originated in India, unlike its close biological cousins the tomato and potato, which are endemic to the Americas.

Vagos Restaurant A white-linen establishment with bright modern art, this is among the only upscale restaurants in town with international offerings such as grilled shish kabobs, large salads, and a variety of pastas. *RD\$185-750; Av. Constitución & C/ Padre Borbón; 528-5400*

Fela's Place Formerly a San Cristóbal institution called Pepe Rosón, it was known for delicious, steaming *pasteles en hoja*. The current owner, Fela, has kept this tradition alive, while adding other Dominican favorites like a filling *mofongo*, and, of course, *la bandera dominicana*. *RD\$100-200; 55 C/ General Leger; 288-2124*

Delidalia An air-conditioned oasis amidst the roar of *motos*, this bakery offers a large selection of both sweet and savory baked goods, such as guava-filled turnovers, carrot cake, *tres leches*, and paninis. Though there are two locations, the one with the larger selection and more pleasant atmosphere is located on Av. Constitución. *RD\$ 20-200; 105 Av. Constitución; 528-7886*

300 | San Cristóbal



SLEEP

Due to its proximity to Santo Domingo, San Cristóbal has not been able to maintain any hotels worth mentioning. If stuck, head to the **Ayala Aparta Hotel** with fans and cold water. When they ask you for how many hours you want the room, say “*para amanecer*,” meaning the whole night.

Ayala Aparta Hotel RD\$300-500; 110 C/ Padre Ayala near corner of C/ Dr. Brioso; 528-3040; Amenities: A/C, fan



Rancho Campeche An ecological ranch near the beaches of Najayo and Palenque, Rancho Campeche offers a rare camping opportunity. Immense and peaceful, the property is home to a number of farm animals, as well as caves and hiking trails.



The owners, Gina Gallardo and Xiomara Fortuna (an internationally recognized world music singer), offer cultural tours, such as “Santo Domingo Raíces,” of the surrounding communities with glimpses into daily life, religion and music. The site provides a quality restaurant, pool, and importantly, bathrooms with showers. RD\$300 for camping, RD\$400 for camping space with tent and mattress; 3 meals, RD\$1100; Contact before arriving: 686-1053, 889-5661; ranchoelcampeche@yahoo.com; www.ranhocampeche.com. From Santo Domingo, after passing San Cristóbal along the southern highway, turn south towards the coast and the community of Duveaux (signaled by a white and black smokestack lettered with “Caei”). Drive through the sugarcane fields, up into the hills, through Duveaux, until reaching El Limón, where there is sign for Rancho Campeche. By public transport, take any *guagua caliente* heading further southwest than San Cristóbal and ask to be dropped off at Ingenio Caei (RD\$140). Then take a *motoconcho* to Rancho Campeche (RD\$150).

DO

Cuevas de Pomier (Cuevas de Borbón)

Located 12 km (7.5 miles) north of San Cristóbal, the 57 caves that make up this complex were declared a protected area in 1996 to prevent damaging limestone quarrying. The main draw here is the endangered cave art by Igneri, Carib, and Taíno indigenous groups, rediscovered by British consul and anthropologist Robert Schomburg more than 60 years ago. This is one of the highest concentrations of prehistoric cave art in the Caribbean, which the public can observe firsthand in the five caves currently open for display: La Sala de los Grandes Edentados, La Cueva del Puente, La Sala de la Penumbra, La Sala de los Grandes Bloques, and La Sala de Boinayel. In times of drought, the Taínos congregated in La Sala de Boinayel, named after the god of rain, and pleaded that Boinayel cry, wetting the earth with his tears. The first cave that visitors enter is La Sala de los Edentados, which refers to the group of mammals called Edentata (including sloths and anteaters) which are classified by their lack of front incisors and molars. A number of skeletons belonging to these animals were found by the professor and spelunker Dato Pagan, leading to the cave’s name: “The Room of the Edentata.” Of the pictographs on display, one of particular interest is what appears to be a man mounted on an animal, referring to the legend of a Taíno man who raised and tamed a dolphin to the point at which it would respond to its given name, Anon, and cart the man around the Caribbean Sea. US\$5; Take the road to La Toma from Highway 2 and continue past La Toma for about 6 km (3.7 miles). In public transport, take a *guagua* to La Toma from El Mercado and then a *moto* from there.

Before the Taínos

The Igneri people were an earlier Arawak-related indigenous group that originally populated present-day Venezuela. They eventually migrated in canoes to the Antilles, including Hispaniola. Later, the Igneri would become displaced by Taíno and Carib populations.

Palacio del Cerro

This five-story garish edifice was originally built for Trujillo in 1949, but the dictator never occupied it despite the ornate interior's liberal usage of Italian marble, numerous rooms for entertaining and repose, and 18 bathrooms. After years of looting, the building underwent significant renovations and many of the rooms were restored to their original flashiness. A few points of interest include the room meant for Trujillo's daughter Angelina, in which the walls and ceiling are covered with brimming baskets and vines of roses, and the room designed for Trujillo, adorned by heavy crown molding and walls almost entirely made of windows overlooking San Cristóbal. A small chapel with a mural by Spanish painter José Vela Zanetti (1913-1999) of a Dominican country fiesta is both a source of beauty and historical intrigue. Focusing on the faces of the dancers, the viewer notices their solemn expressions, an affront by the painter to Trujillo, expressing the fear and repression felt by the people during his reign. The building is now used as a training school for penitentiary employees, but offers free, guided tours to the public. *From the Parque Central, take Avenida Luperón west until Isla Gas Station, then turn left up the hill. El Cerro will be on the left.*

José Vela Zanetti

To see more of Vela Zanetti's murals reminiscent of the pastoral scenes of Diego Rivera, head to the **Instituto Politécnico Loyola** (C/19 de Marzo b/w 18 de Agosto and Araujo). An exile of the Spanish Civil War, Vela Zanetti shared his talent throughout the Americas. One of his most celebrated murals, "La Lucha del Hombre por la Paz" (Man's Fight for Peace) is in the headquarters of the United Nations in New York City.

La Casa de Caoba

Named appropriately, this once grandiose home built for Trujillo in 1940 was made entirely of *caoba* (mahogany), but now is nothing more than a pillaged and abandoned haunting ghost of glory. Nearly all the mahogany and ornate décor have been stripped and the surviving furniture was moved to El Cerro. All that remains is an eerie sensation and a couple squatters, who will give an informal tour.

Located on a hill off the road to La Toma. The turn-off is an unmarked rocky dirt road best identified by asking a motoconchista or a local.

La Toma

Established as the first reservoir in the Americas in the 1520s, this swimming hole (now made of poured cement) is great for experiencing how locals relax on weekends by throwing back cold ones and blaring *bachata*. *Located 6 km (3.7 miles) north of San Cristóbal. When nearing San Cristóbal from Santo Domingo on Highway 2, take the exit for La Toma and follow signs. In public transport, take a guagua leaving for La Toma from the Mercado in San Cristóbal.*

Parque Piedras Vivas and Iglesia Nuestra Señora de la Consolación

This pleasant park is on the former site of one of Trujillo's residences. It is built from stones brought from distinct regions of the country, giving rise to the name "Parque Piedras Vivas" or Live Stone Park. Find the mustard neo-colonial church of Nuestra Señora de la Consolación bordering the park. The church features vibrant biblical murals splashed across the center chamber walls. *Av. Constitución and C/ General Cabral*

BEACHES

Playa Najayo

During the week, Najayo affords a quiet and convenient respite. For a livelier atmosphere, join the weekend crowd rolling in from San Cristóbal and Santo Domingo in SUVs packed tight with passengers and libations. Be careful when entering the water, because there is a prickly rock shelf, and the waves can be strong. There are a few food shacks along the beach, all with essentially the same menu of whole fried fish on a bed of golden *tostones*.

Playa Palenque

A few kilometers west of Najayo is Palenque, which tends to be more raucous than its neighbor. Similarly styled fried fish shacks serve up a Presidente beer *bien fría* here as well. *Both beaches are accessible through public transportation by picking up a guagua at the stop for Palenque near the Mercado Modelo in San Cristóbal (see Transport). For Najayo, simply ask the cobrador to let you off at Playa Najayo, or stay on until the last stop for Palenque.*

Festival de Sainagua

This animated annual music festival has showcased *palo* and other forms Afro-Caribbean music for more than 35 years. Cultural heritage comes alive through the contagious rhythms of the Atabales groups of Villa Mella or the Guloyas of San Pedro de Macorís, whose festive costumes and dances mesmerize viewers. Located just outside San Cristóbal, the Festival de Sainagua occurs over an entire late November weekend, so the best option for overnight stay is Rancho Campeche. Perhaps best of all, the performances are free. *To arrive using*

For **nightlife** in San Cristóbal, **Kairo** at 160 C/ Constitución is a popular dance club on weekends (no cover).

A Scenic Moto Ride through Cane Country

For a picturesque *moto* ride (about 20 minutes) and an alternative route to the beaches of Palenque and Najayo, take this meandering, hilly road through the sugar cane fields of Ingenio Caeí and quaint rural communities like Duveaux, which eventually opens up to the coast.

To arrive at this road by public transportation, ask the *cobrador* to let you off at "la parada del Ingenio Caeí." When a black and white smokestack lettered with "Caeí" appears in the middle of a sugarcane field, the stop is quite close. At the *parada*, tell the least pushy *motoconchista* to take you to either Playa Najayo or Palenque. Don't pay more than RD\$300 and be prepared to negotiate the price.

public transport, take the *guagua* from San Cristóbal's Mercado to Palenque and ask the *cobrador* to leave you in Sainagua, located after the large cemetery on the right.

Baní

Named after a prominent Taíno cacique under Caonabo, Baní means “abundant water” in Taíno, though the city sits at the edge of the driest part of the country. The city was formally established in 1764, when the Spanish Capitán Manuel de Azlor y Urries purchased land in what is now the community of Cerro Gordo. During the Haitian occupation, General Dessalines burned the town to the ground in 1805, but the industrious townspeople rebuilt the city within five years. Since then, the province in which it lies, Peravia, has grown steadily, with a population now numbering around 200,000. *Banilejos* (residents of Baní) proudly proclaim their home as the town of liberators and poets, including Enrique Montaña and Pedro Landestoy Garrido. Among the most famous *Banilejos* is Generalísimo Máximo Gómez y Báez (1836-1905), who originally served in the Dominican army when it was under Spanish control during the re-annexation of the 1860s. Gómez left for Cuba and soon began to conspire with Cuban revolutionaries for independence from Spain. Gómez, together with José Martí, fiercely and successfully fought the Spanish for Cuba's independence, which the U.S. eventually granted in 1902 following the Spanish-American War.

Baní is also known for its tremendous diversity and production of mangos. The season's pinnacle is celebrated during the Feria del Mango, which takes place every June. Salt is another major product from the area, extracted from the mines by the beach in Las Salinas. Remittances (See Introduction, P.XX) from the numerous *Banilejos* in the U.S. also have a large role in bolstering the local economy. The fruits of *Banilejos'* labor abroad can be seen especially on the way to Playa Los Almendros, where cement mansions line the road.

Interestingly, the majority of Baní's expats have congregated around Boston, Massachusetts.

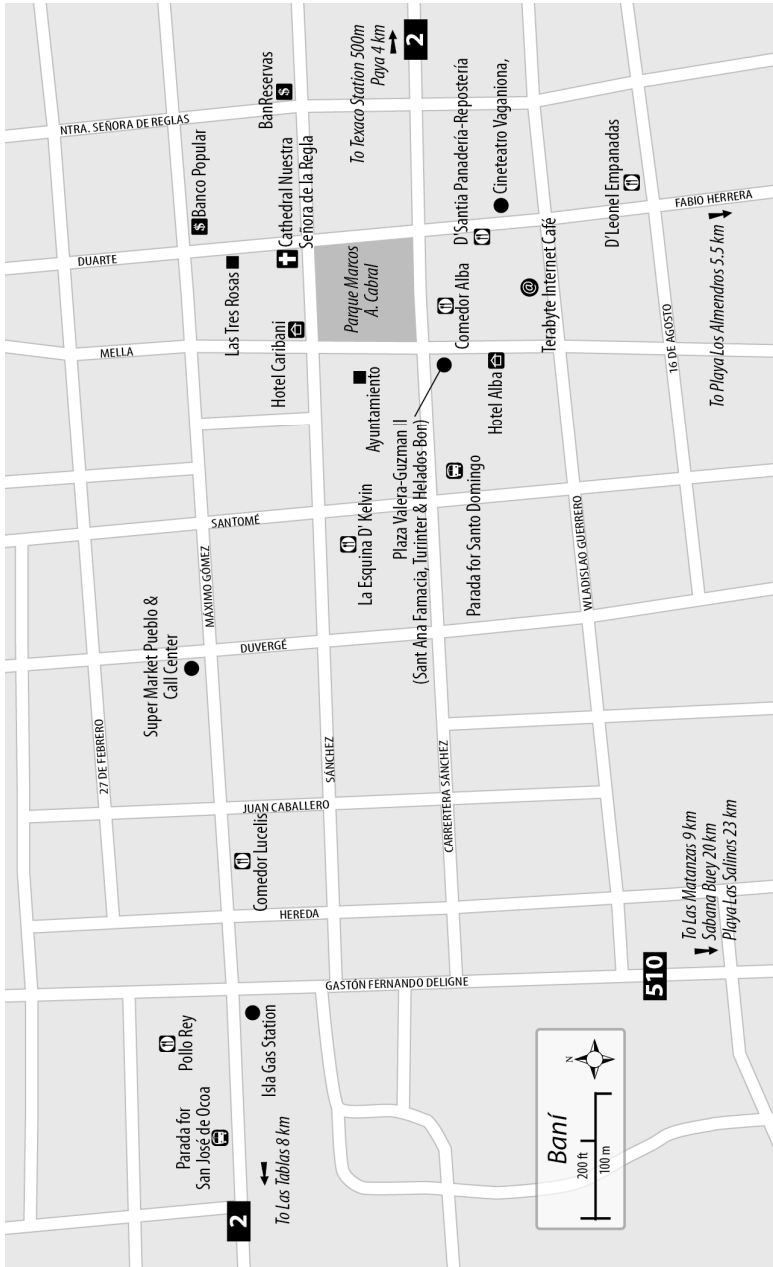
TRANSPORT

From Santo Domingo: *Expresos* RD\$100; *calientes* RD\$85; 5am-8pm every 20 minutes; 1hr.; depart from Parque Enriqueillo. It is also possible to hail the *guagua* anywhere along its route, which runs up C/ Bolívar through Gazcue and passes through Pintura before leaving the city.

To Santo Domingo: *Expresos* RD\$100; *calientes* RD\$85; 5am-8pm every 20 minutes; 1hr.; *parada* located slightly west of the Parque Central on C/ Billini.

To San José de Ocoa: RD\$50; hourly 7am-7pm; 30 min.; *parada* on Carretera Sánchez just west of the Parador Baní

To head farther southwest: All *guaguas* heading southwest pass along Carretera Sánchez, which becomes C/ Máximo Gómez in town. You can hail any *guagua caliente* along this road. Those heading to Barahona (or farther) often make a stop at the Parador Baní at the town's exit along Carretera Sánchez, where you can also hop on.



INFO

Medical Attention

Santa Ana Farmacia is located the corner of Calles Billini and Mella in Plaza II Valera-Guzman (380-2525). For emergencies, head to **Grupo Medico Baní** on C/ Santomé and C/ Billini (346-4444).

Communication

Terabyte Internet Café is located one block south of the park (522-4622) and a **Call Center** is located on C/ Duvergé near C/ Máximo Gómez.

The **Post Office** is located at 18 C/ Canela Mota (522-3480/906-0028) or for faster shipping, **FedEx** services are available in the tourist agency, Turinter (Calles Billini and Mella in Plaza II Valera-Guzman; 522-5363).

Banks

Banco Popular has two locations in the center of town (corner of C/ Máximo Gómez and Duarte or 22 C/ Billini; 522-2225). There is also a **BanReservas** at 32 C/ Sánchez near C/ Ntra. Señora de Reglas (522-3801) and a **Banco León** on C/ Sánchez and Mella (476-2000). All are open Mon.-Fri. 8:30am-4pm and Sat. 9am-1pm.

Gas Stations

A **Texaco Gas Station** is located on the main highway when entering town if coming from Santo Domingo. There is also an **Isla Gas Station** at the edge of town on the corner of Carretera Sánchez and Gastón Fernando Deligne.

Grocery Stores

For **groceries**, head to the **Super Market Pueblo** on the corner of C/ Duvergé and C/ Máximo Gómez.

EAT

The *comedores* of Baní are the best bet for a delicious and cheap meal, as sit-down restaurants are rare. Try the very popular **Comedor Lucelis** (RD\$100) located at 57 Máximo Gómez, where Doña Magalis also sells *arepas* and hot chocolate from her

Gastón Fernando Deligne

The greatest poets often draw inspiration from personal suffering, and Gastón Fernando Deligne is no exception. Orphaned at a young age, the Catholic priest, Francisco Javier Billini, raised Deligne and ensured that he received a quality, private education in Santo Domingo. Following his graduation from high school, Deligne dedicated himself to the art of letters, spinning out poetry often referred to as *poesía sicológica* or psychological poetry for his often-heavy themes and ability to venture into the human psyche, particularly the feminine mindset. Examples of this cerebral talent can be seen in such poems as, "Confidencias de Cristina." Despite his success among the authoritative Dominican publications of the 19th and early 20th century including "Letras y Ciencias" and "La Cuna de América," Deligne committed suicide in 1913 after years of enduring the complications of leprosy.

bright blue cart across the street. Alternately, try **La Esquina D' Kelvin** (RD\$100-150; corner of C/Santomé and Sánchez), serving up absurdly large sandwiches overflowing with such combos as pulled chicken or pork with gouda cheese, which should be paired with Bani's favorite flavor of *batida*, mango.

D'Santia Panadería-Repostería A rather posh gem, this bakery/café offers savory, mini-pitas stuffed with pulled chicken salad, along with sweets like glistening chocolate donuts and custard cake topped with fresh fruit. Everything is fresh and made daily on the premises; pair your treat with creamy *batidas* and a hot, sweet espresso. RD\$30-150; C/ Duarte across from Cinetatro Vaganiona, just south of the Parque Central; 522-6583/346-8640

D' Leonel Empanadas For a cheap and delicious snack, head to this empanada stand offering the best variety of fillings in town. RD\$30-100; Corner of Fabio Herrera and 16 de Agosto

Pollo Rey A rest stop for *guaguas* heading farther south, this popular eatery offers an abundance of aromatic fried chicken, as well as home-style Dominican favorites like *mangú* topped with liberal helpings of fried salami, onions, or eggs. Sweet treats, coffee, and fresh fruit are also available. RD\$ 70-200; Corner of Carretera Francisco del Rosario Sánchez and C/ Gastón Fernando Deligne; 522-9000

Las Tres Rosas

Nearly 70 years ago, Señorita Elena Virginia Mejía Lujo and her sister Carmen began a humble business selling *dulce de leche* out of their small, wooden home. Señorita Elena started the business out of necessity, tasked with raising her younger brother, and later, his children. Lucia Virginia Mejía de Ruíz, niece and current co-owner with her husband and son, always refers to her aunt as Señorita (not Señora) because throughout her 105 years on earth, Elena never married. Today, Las Tres Rosas operates a factory that supplies its three locations across the area, in Bani, Paya, and Escondido. All of these offer the same delightful variety of classic and harder to find *dulces* such as *leche con limón* (milk with lemon candy) or *dulce de cajuil* (cashew fruit candy). Stop by the original house where Señorita Elena cooked up the first batch, located just north of the Parque Central at 18 Calle Duarte (522-3694).

SLEEP

Staying overnight in Bani is less than desirable, as the majority of the options are of the unsavory motel variety. In a pinch, try **Hotel Caribani**, which is one of the few that does not have an "afternoon rate" and does have important comforts like A/C and hot water. RD\$1200-1600; 12 C/ Sánchez; 522-3871/3872/3873; hotelcaribani@gmail.com

For a more economical option, try **Hotel Alba**, a no-nonsense place with two beds per room, TV, and cold water only. RD\$600-1000; C/ Mella b/w Guerrero and Billini; no phone number

DO

Parque Marcos A. Cabral (Parque Central)

The social center for town, the Parque Central is bordered by such local monuments as the *Ayuntamiento* (City Hall), adorned with murals, and the recently restored Cathedral Nuestra Señora de la Regla. The cathedral, whose design dates back to the late 1920s, is built on the same site where the original colonial church was con-

structed in the late 1680s during the reign of the Spanish King Carlos II. Various shops surround the park, including the heavenly air-conditioned Helados Bon/Yogen-Früz joint and a couple Internet cafés. These businesses keep the park constantly abuzz, along with vendors peddling shoe shines to men taking a break from work or tiny coffees to older women bragging to each other about their children in *Nueva Yol* (New York).

Feria de Mango

Though not the most fertile region, Baní has managed to come out on top in mango production and marketing. Each year in June, Baní, the self-proclaimed “mango capital” of the country, hosts the *Feria de Mango* (the Mango Fair) in honor of the popular crop of sweet, fleshy, and bright-orange fruit. During mango season, the air is fragrant with its thick tropical aroma, and neighbors give sackfuls to local children. Hundreds of varieties of mangos are grown on the island, and many can be sampled at the fair. The country exports almost US\$5 million of mangos annually.

Playa Los Almendros

Only five minutes from the center of town, this grey-sand beach was undergoing a much-needed makeover at the time of research, involving beautification efforts like planting trees and creating a small park. Just before arriving to the beach, there are a few establishments (serving fried fish and *moro*) such as **Villa Cana**, which is a popular spot for dancing on Mondays after 6pm, and **Villa Eloa**, which also offers hourly cabañas for the other kind of dance. *To arrive, take Calle Fabio Herrera (the continuation of C/ Duarte) all the way south to Playa Los Almendros (also known as Playa Baní); RD\$50-60 motoconcho*

Playa Las Salinas/Salt Mines

On the way to Las Salinas are a series of sand dunes, known as **Las Dunas**, whose unusual beauty is worth a photo. Located approximately 25 km (16 miles) from the center of Baní, Las Salinas Beach is not the best the South has to offer, but it is a relaxing place to cool off from the hot Southern climate. From the beach, blinding white piles of salt, harvested from the surrounding salt flats, shimmer under the South's unobstructed sun. The manager will gladly let visitors take back a handful of this crucial condiment and local moneymaker.

To get to Las Salinas, head southwest toward the coast on Carretera Máximo Gómez. Pick up this highway by turning left at the Isla Gas Station located on the highway leading out of Baní heading west (Parador Baní is on the right). Drive to the end of the road and turn right and pass through the towns of Villa Sombrero and Matanzas. Keep going until the coast and follow signs for Las Salinas.

You can also pick up a guagua (RD\$80; 20 min.; hourly 7am-6pm) at the *parada* located a few blocks south of El Mercado Público.

In the town of Las Salinas, hotel and restaurant options are limited, but there is one establishment that is well worth the trip. **Hotel Salinas** is a splendid option for a relaxing day trip or even a weekend getaway from Santo Domingo. All 35 rooms are adorned with bright white linens that contrast the dark wooden furniture, and though they come with A/C, the ocean seen from the bedroom windows provides a refreshing breeze. The hotel draws both a wealthy Dominican crowd and windsurfing fanatics, who have been visiting the hotel since it held a windsurfing competition in 1988. Offering a private beach, pool, glamorous chaise-lounges, and a dock with a

gazebo, Las Salinas Hotel creates an exclusive atmosphere without breaking a traveler's budget. RD\$2000-3000; Puerto Hermosa; on the right on the main road through Las Salinas, 866-8141; 310-8141; hotel_salinas@hotmail.com; www.hotelsalinas.net; Amenities: A/C, hot water, TV, restaurant/bar, pool, boat dock

Los Corbanitos

Faded fishing boats are a bather's only company at this beach known for its mangroves and the diverse sea life that seeks shelter among the gnarled roots. With few rocks or coral reefs to obstruct the swimmer's path, these waters are warm and inviting (albeit somewhat difficult to find due to lack of signage on the poor dirt road leading to the beach). The striking arid surroundings contrast dramatically with vibrant blue sea, but this isolated vista is in danger: The Lemca Group has plans to convert the beach into a massive luxury resort with multiple hotels, a port, villas, condominiums, a golf course, and a helipad for those who find the 23 km (14.3 miles) from Bani or 88 km (54.7 miles) from Santo Domingo simply too far to drive. Turn left at the Isla Gas Station located on the highway (Carretera Máximo Gómez) leading out of Bani heading west (Parador Bani is on the right). Drive to the end of the road and turn right at the fork (just past the community of Los Tumbaos). The entrance to Corbanitos is through the town of Sabana Buey.

La Gallera de las Matanzas

A culturally authentic experience, but not for the weak-stomached, this famous cockfighting ring in the nearby town of Las Matanzas brings in competitors from across the region. While the venue generally attracts only males hoping to win big, it occasionally fills with a more equally gendered crowd swaying its hips when there are live merengue or bachata acts. By playing the curious foreigner card, newcomers might be able to get tickets for seats in the first few rows. Otherwise, take in the views from the balcony of sweaty, red-faced men as they roar at their gallo (rooster) to win them money. Try to decipher the multitude of hand gestures being thrown through the air used to place bets, while sharing a bottle of rum with your neighbor. Watch as grown men cry over the loss of their gallo, which is not only their treasured pet, but often a crucial source of income. To get there, take Carretera Máximo Gómez west and then ask a local where the gallera is (streets are unmarked).

Mirador de Manaclar

For an outstanding view, head up to the Mirador de Manaclar, a lookout point, where the vista pans across the Las Salinas and Los Corbanitos beaches, and the Bahía de Ocoa, along with the town of Bani, and the twinkling lights of San Cristóbal at night. There is no public transport, so find a motoconcho with a good-sized motor (100cc or more) from the Fortaleza. In a private vehicle with four-wheel drive, head down C/ Duvergé through Villa Guera until reaching the sign for La Montería (left) and Manaclar (straight). Continue straight until reaching the cell towers.

El Santuario San Martín de Porres

Located in the sleepy village of Las Tablas, the locals claim that each rock in this sanctuary was placed by the hands of a local man from Las Matanzas over the course of thirty years. The mysterious man built the sanctuary in honor of San Martín de Porres (1579-1639), a bi-racial Catholic saint who dedicated his life to the poor and humble, and was known for his embracing attitude towards all humans and animals, even rodents. The monument for the saint consists of a mount made of stones with a

chapel at its crux. The stone altar is covered with candles, a painting of San Martín de Porres, and crucifixes. On the perimeter are living quarters (currently uninhabited) and a gazebo used for community meetings. While this is not worth going out of the way to see, it is a charming and tranquil spot at which to stop after a day at Las Salinas Beach. At the top of the mount, there is a delightful view of the ocean, mountains, and the desert surrounding Baní. *Using public transport from Baní, take the Las Tablas guagua and ask to be left at El Santuario de Las Tablas*

"Pa 'Ila" of Baní: the Sweets of Paya

Don't leave the province of Peravia without trying the sweets made by **Las Tres Rosas** or **Las Marías**, located next to each other along the highway in Paya, a small town just east before Baní. Savor the original *dulce de leche* or mouthwatering *coco tierno con leche* (tender coconut with milk), found in the refrigerated section.

San José de Ocoa

After winding around empty mountain curves deeper and higher into the Sierra de Ocoa, what seems like a road to nowhere opens up into the quaint mountain town of San José de Ocoa. Untainted by commercial tourism, Ocoa has maintained a tranquil pace of life, where there is always extra rice and beans for the unexpected guest and time for a piping hot *cafecito*. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, known for denouncing the enslavement of the Taínos, made the first written reference to San José de Ocoa in the 16th century when he described the then sparsely-populated Taíno province of Maníey. The region became known as El Maniel in the early 17th century when runaway slaves, or *cimarrones*, took refuge there. This population was eventually wiped out thanks to the combination of measles, smallpox, and the military campaign under Juan Villalobos to capture runaway slaves in the 1660s.

The second settlement came in the early 19th century, when a young man from Baní named Andrés Pimentel fled to Ocoa with his lover to escape her family's disapproval of their courtship. Others followed their lead, founding a municipality in 1858, but it was not until 2000 that Ocoa was officially declared a province. Ocoa continues to be a rural haven for its 60,000 inhabitants, who live primarily off small-scale agricultural production. The most common crops are avocados and potatoes, which blanket the ridges and valleys surrounding town.

Cimarrones

Coming from the Spanish word for "wild," *cimarrón* was a term used by Spanish colonists and their descendants to refer to runaway African slaves in Dominican Republic. Seeking refuge from the shackles of slavery, *cimarrones* chose mountainous hideaways like the Sierra de Ocoa to form communities where they could live freely. The terminology has carried over into the current century, used by Dominicans, often self-referentially, to refer those who live outside the constraints of traditional societal rules. Among the modern *cimarrones* are several underground artists and musicians, who reject the status quo of society that they believe promotes political corruption and repressive conformity.

TRANSPORT

San José de Ocoa is located 23 km (14 miles) north Highway 2, along Highway 41.

From Santo Domingo: *Caliente* RD\$130, *expreso* RD\$140; 4am-6pm every 20 minutes; 2.5 hrs.; from C/ Bolívar near Parque Independencia.

To Santo Domingo: *Caliente* RD\$130, *expreso* RD\$140; 4am-6pm every 20 minutes; 2.5 hrs.; *parada* just off the Parque Central on C/ Duarte, next to the Supermercado.

To continue further South: Take the Santo Domingo *guagua* to El Cruce de Ocoa (30 minutes south of Ocoa), then wait for the corresponding *guagua* heading west. *Guaguas* won't stop unless you wave them down, so when you see yours approaching, be sure to wave vigorously!

To Bani: RD\$60; 6am-6pm every 30 minutes or when full; 30 min.; mini-vans located on the north side of the park (C/ Duarte)

To Rancho Arriba: RD\$100; Safari-style jeeps make three daily trips (two on Sunday) leaving from the stop east of the Parque Central on C/ Duarte: Mon.-Sat.: 6am, 8:30am, 11am; Sun.: 6am, 8:30am or later; 2 hrs.

To Piedra Blanca: From Rancho Arriba, *guaguas* leave for Piedra Blanca, the connection point to the Cibao, but an overnight stay in Rancho Arriba is required because these *guaguas* only leave in the early morning (RD \$90; 7am; 2 hrs.). Buses depart from the big *colmado* in the center of Rancho Arriba, but be sure to ask around because they are not well marked and do not run a fixed route through town. This loop definitely covers the road less traveled, and offers a fascinating and scenic alternative route to the north instead of through the capital – but just be sure to have a very flexible schedule.

To La Horma (along the Ocoa-Constanza highway): RD\$50; 11am, 12:30pm and 4pm pickup truck (arrive 30 minutes early to ensure a seat in the cab – otherwise, it's a tough trip in the back); 1 hr.; *parada* located at La Cafetera Americana near the Isla Gas Station. Ask for Zapata, a friendly character, who is always at the *parada* and therefore knows which drivers came down the mountain that day and when they are leaving.

To Valle Nuevo and Constanza: RD\$350; up to 4 hrs.; At the time of research, safari jeeps ran bi-weekly trips from Ocoa to Constanza leaving at sunrise from C/ Duarte, east of the Parque Central. The route has been suspended in the past due to poor road conditions and lack of demand, so ask around town to see if the jeep is making trips that week and on which days.

Within Ocoa: Hire a *motoconchista* to go anywhere within town (RD\$20) and to many of the surrounding villages. To neighboring municipalities like Sabana Larga (there is also a *guagua* for Sabana Larga that runs along C/ Duarte heading east), a ride will cost about RD\$50 and trips to the surrounding villages run RD\$150-350.

INFO

Medical Attention

Hospital San José de Ocoa (558-2372) is a public hospital with limited resources that should only be used for emergencies. (C/ Canada; next to the Escuela Pública, near corner of C/ María Asunción). **Farmacia Bicar** is on the corner of C/ 16 de Agosto & C/ San José.

Communication

The most reliable internet café, **Adachi.net**, in town is located two blocks north of the Parque Central on the corner of C/ Andrés Pimentel and C/ Luperón. The **Post Office** is at the corner of C/ Duarte and C/ 16 de Agosto across from the *guagua* stop to Santo Domingo.

Banks

Both the **Banco Popular** (#83; 558-2215) and **BanReservas** (#61; 558-2096) are located on C/ Andrés Pimentel near the Parque Central and are open Mon.-Fri. 8:30am-4pm and Sat. 9am-1pm.



Police

The **Destacamento Policial** is located on the corner of Av. Juan Pablo Duarte and Av. Canada (558-2211).

Gas Stations

Coming into town, there is a **Texaco** (C/16 de Agosto, by C/ Sor. María Asunción) and when leaving town towards Sabana Larga there are two gas stations (including an Isla) along C/ Duarte.

Grocery Stores

There are three grocery stores in Ocoa, each carrying a similar selection. One is located one block to the west and the other a block to the east of the Parque Central on Calle Duarte. Both are open from 9am-6pm Monday to Saturday and 10am-2pm Sunday. **Supermercado Ocoa** is located four blocks east of the Parque Central on Calle Duarte and has extended hours on Sundays.

EAT

Surrounding the park are a few food options including **Hotel Marien** serving traditional Dominican food (RD\$100-250; corner of C/San José and C/ Pimentel). For lighter fare, try the sandwich joint on the park's east side, offering no-frills grilled ham and cheese sandwiches and fresh fruit smoothies (RD\$30-150).

Hotel Baco Serving up inexpensive Dominican food, this hotel-restaurant always has a generous *plato del día* as well as a hearty ham and cheese or Cuban sandwich. During the season, try *guandules guisados* (stewed pigeon peas) with rice and stewed chicken. Wash it down with the deliciously original oatmeal carrot juice, or fresh-squeezed cherry juice. *RD\$100-150; Corner of C/ Duvergé and C/ 16 de Agosto; 558-2368*

SLEEP

Hotel-Restaurant El Barcón Centrally located and reasonably priced, this hotel has modest, tidy rooms with simple but bright decorations and a restaurant that is open all day. *RD\$400-1200; Corner of C/ Canada and C/ San José; Amenities: A/C or fan, hot water, TV*

Hotel Baco While the rooms are small and dim, this budget hotel is located on a quiet street allowing for a restful night. Plus, it has that oh-so refreshing oatmeal-carrot juice drink downstairs. *RD\$400-600; Corner of C/ Duvergé and C/ 16 de Agosto; 558-2368; Amenities: A/C, fan, hot water, TV*

Rancho Franciso This serene enclave surrounded by broad trees and set along a babbling stream is certainly the most comfortable accommodation in Ocoa. Cool off in either the guests' private pool or mix it up with the locals in the larger pool open to the public. The hotel's restaurant offers a variety of local specialties, ranging from fried chicken to stewed goat. If luck has it, a visit to Rancho Franciso will coincide with one of the live merengue or bachata bands that perform here regularly. *RD\$1000-1500 for a room and RD\$200-400 for the restaurant; located 1 km south of Ocoa on Highway 41; Amenities: A/C, fan, TV, restaurant/bar, two pools, dance hall*

DO

El Parque Central

Vines wrap around mature trees, children chase each other in the central gazebo, and neighbors gather on the shady benches to catch up on the latest gossip or the previous evening's baseball games in this small, pleasant green refuge in the center of

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town. Vendors selling *frío frío* (shaved iced with syrup), coffee, snacks, and pirated DVDs hang out around the perimeter. There are also two ice cream shops (**Helados Bon** and **Nestlé**) so that visitors can enjoy a coconut *paleta* (ice pop) while chatting with an *Ocoeño*.

Mercado (El Reguero)

Located on Calle Duvergé, this Thursday-only outdoor market is full of housewares, shoes, and clothing from *pacas* (huge bundles of clothing donated from North America) that reach the hands of vendors through mysterious ways. While the majority of it is junk, this market provides an interesting perspective as to where some clothing donations end up, as well as good practice for negotiating skills in Spanish.

What a reguero!

In Spanish, the word *reguero* has a number of official meanings, including “trail” and “small stream.” However, colloquially, it has also taken on the significance of “mess” or “disorder.” For example, the famous children’s book *Curious George Cleans Up* is translated into Spanish as *Jorge El Curioso Limpia el Reguero*, or “Curious George cleans up the mess.” Locals have therefore given a sly nickname to their weekly market.

Presa de Jigüey

La Presa (dam) is not recommended for actual swimming, but the challenging road to get there offers some excellent views of Ocoa (Four-wheel drive is required). Pack a picnic and enjoy the water views, while talking up some local fishermen. *To arrive in a private vehicle, head northwest along C/ Duarte/Highway 41 for about 2 km (1.2 miles) until reaching the sign for Presa de Jigüey, at which point turn right and continue for another 16 km (10 miles) along this bumpy dirt road until reaching the dam.*

Charco de Mancebo

A favorite local spot to cool off, this waterfall and connected lake provide great swimming year-round. There’s also a 3.7m (12ft) cliff jump to add to the fun.

Padre Quinn

After 42 consecutive years of service in Ocoa, the Canadian Catholic Priest Luis Quinn came to be known for the remarkable development he achieved in the province, as well as unwavering dedication and affection for its people. In 1953, the year following his graduation from seminary in Toronto, Padre Quinn made his first visit to Santo Domingo. Returning multiple times throughout the 1950s and 1960s to serve in parishes throughout the South, it was not until 1965 that Padre Quinn made Ocoa his permanent home. A champion for a school in every community and access to health care for all rural populations, this tireless humanitarian gathered funds to provide the majority of the educational and healthcare infrastructure seen in even the most remote villages of Ocoa. From paving roads to providing livestock and seeds for farmers, there were few areas in which Padre Quinn did not lend a hand. His death in October 2007 could be felt across the country, but particularly in Ocoa, where his loyal admirers mourned the loss of a man who came through where government officials fell short.

To get there, ask a motoconchista at the parada for El Pinar to take you to the Río de Mancebo, then go upriver from the road until reaching the falls.

Charco de La Ciénaga

This cool swimming hole also has an impressive 4.6m (15ft) cliff jump, but only during the rainy season, which starts in the spring and can last until early fall.

Take note, there are many villages called La Ciénaga in the province of Ocoa, and across the country for that matter – the name means “swamp,” of which apparently there are many. Be sure to specify to the motoconchista that you want “La Ciénaga de Los Corozos” (not, say, La Ciénaga de Naranjal). After arriving at La Ciénaga, go downriver to find the waterfall. There are also some excellent mountain hikes in this area, but they are not marked, so it’s best to go with someone from a nearby village as a guide.

Parque Nacional Valle Nuevo

Known among hyperbole-happy locals for having sub-freezing temperatures, Parque Nacional Valle Nuevo (also known as Parque Nacional Juan Bautista Pérez Rancier) offers spectacular hiking and mountain biking for the outdoor adventurer. Covering an area of 910 square kilometers (351 square miles) across the four provinces of La Vega, San José de Ocoa, Monseñor Nouel, and Azua, this expansive area is the source of various rivers that breath life into the South, including the Blanco, Banilejo, Cuevas, Grande, Nizao, Ocoa, and Tireíto. Experienced mountain climbers often prefer the peaks of Valle Nuevo, because of the lack of infrastructure and foot traffic, as compared to the areas around Constanza and Jarabacoa. The highest peak in the park is Alto de la Bandera at 2,842m (9324ft), though the park also boasts a number of other challenging heights, including Loma del Macho and Tetero de Mejía.

Daytime temperatures generally stay cool, running in the 60s or 70s (16-20°C), perfect for outdoor sports. Temperatures can reach as low as 41°F/5°C, even as locals claim otherwise. These pine-covered ridges have inspired tall tales of explorers

Ocoa-Constanza Scenic Highway

Traversing the Sierra de Ocoa into Cordillera Central, this tremendous rocky dirt highway steers through the agricultural villages of La Horma, then wanders among the conifers of the Valle Nuevo National Park (P. XXX), eventually reaching Constanza’s high valley perch.

The views begin as arid, grassy plains outside Ocoa, then the vistas change into the green hills speckled with brightly painted wooden homes of La Horma, and finally lofty, pine-covered peaks of Valle Nuevo and Constanza come into view. Natural wonders like the Antilles’ tallest waterfall, **Aguas Blancas** (P.XX), and perpetually fog-covered ridges punctuate the route, adding to the majestic feel of this exciting mountain ride.

The entire trip is approximately 90 km (56 miles), but hurricane season in the DR occasionally gives the route an unplanned reconstruction, carving out sides of mountains and making deeper cuts into the already curvy road. Therefore, plan for at least four to five hours for the trip from Ocoa to Constanza, if it is possible at all, in order to take in the sights.

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freezing to death after getting lost in a “third dimension” that supposedly leaves anyone who enters utterly disoriented. Dehydration and/or too much Brugal is the more likely explanation, but the exaggerated storytelling that this area has provoked is reflective of its remote location and dense forests, home to moss-covered rocks, curling ferns, and towering pines.

TRANSPORT

The best and generally only way to access Valle Nuevo is in a private vehicle with four-wheel drive, or a mountain bike either from San José de Ocoa or Constanza (See Transport in San José de Ocoa, and Constanza). Valle Nuevo is located 14 km (8.7 miles) from Constanza and about 75 km (46.6 miles) from Ocoa along the Antonio Duvergé Highway, also known as Highway 41. Trujillo completed this highway connecting Ocoa and Constanza in 1950, but not even a patch of asphalt remains after numerous hurricanes and landslides have nearly reclaimed the road back to nature. The highway is muddy and mountainous, especially if coming from Ocoa, so only experienced mountain bikers and four-wheel drivers should attempt this road.

EAT

Arrive well -stocked because there are no places to buy food or water once in Valle Nuevo.

SLEEP

Camping in Valle Nuevo

There are few restrictions on camping locations, though many people tend to camp near the flat clearing that surrounds La Pirámide. For more privacy, take some time to explore the offshoots of the Constanza-Ocoa highway through Valle Nuevo. There are a few hidden camping-friendly clearings among the pines where lumber companies had their way with the land before Valle Nuevo was declared a protected area.

The Secretary of Environment recently built cabins equipped with bunk beds, bathroom, and a kitchen to meet the growing interest and need for lodging in the park. Talk to rangers upon arrival about overnight stays, and be sure to bring a sleeping bag adequate for the chilly temperatures.

For additional information on where to Eat and Sleep, and what to Do, see Constanza.

Azua

Azua was founded in 1504, very early on in the colonial game. Like many Dominican cities, Azua's trajectory has followed a tragic arc and its history is littered with progress, hope, and disaster. Precious metals, including gold, were discovered soon after its establishment, but boom times were short. Instead, sugarcane farming and processing became the Azua's principal industry, and still stands as an important economic foundation for the entire region. Pirates, a mainstay in 16th century Caribbean waters, plundered and pillaged this coastal town several times. An earthquake in 1751 leveled Azua, causing the inhabitants to move farther inland to its current location flanked by the Sierra de Ocoa.

-- END PREVIEW--