

ECO & ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES

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The Dominican Republic (DR) is one of the few countries in the Caribbean with nine life zones, or ecological zones. This diversity plays a major role in making eco and adventure tourism in the country so remarkable and exciting. The DR has the highest and lowest sea level points in the Caribbean with Pico Duarte at 10,128 feet above and Lake Enriquillo at 144 feet below. In between these elevations is a playground of environments from tropical rainforest to arid desert. These areas are matched with adventures and activities designed to get adrenaline rushing, hearts racing and senses bursting.

There are several professional tour companies that offer a variety of activities in the DR. Some of these companies offer competitive tours, depending on the location, while others specialize in a particular area, such as rock climbing. (For more information on these companies, see the Tour Operators backgrounder.) The following is an explanation of the tours and activities the DR offers for getting in-touch with primal instincts.

Bird-watching

The DR is a haven for birdwatchers with over 300 species of brightly colored birds that call the island home either permanently or as a migration layover. Twenty-seven species are endemic, meaning only found on the island of Hispaniola. Another 15 species are either endangered or threatened, including the bay-breasted cuckoo, LaSelle thrush and Hispaniolan crossbill. One commonly found bird of special interest is the palmchat because it is not only an endemic species but an endemic family.

The southwestern region is very popular with birders because it combines a semi-desert zone with coast, lagoons, islands, lakes and cliffs, providing a diverse habitat for a large variety of avian. In fact, more than 130 species are located in the Jaragua National Park alone.

Several tour companies and birding clubs in the United States offer birding trips with expert ornithologists. Also, local birding guides can be hired. One such guide is leading DR birder and environmentalist Kate Wallace, a former naturalist with the Massachusetts Audubon Society. She has lived in the DR for over a decade and began bird guiding in 1998.

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Camping

There are no official campgrounds in the DR. However, for those looking for a more rugged camping adventure, the DR presents some unique opportunities for camping in its national parks and on a few uninhabited islands. The following are three of the most popular areas for a more primal experience.

Pico Duarte in the central mountains

Tent camping is allowed just about anywhere in Armando Bermudez National Park. It is here that visitors can find Pico Duarte. The DR asks that campers try to use pre-existing sites. Rustic cabins are available in the Valley de Tetero and along its main trail. A park permit, which costs approximately \$5, and a local guide are required by the national parks office. Both are available at the Armando Bermudez National Park entrance.

Cayo Levantado on the Samana Peninsula

Camping is allowed on the remote side of the island, which is accessible by a \$40 roundtrip ferry ride from the main port of Samana. Permission to camp is required from authorities located at the port. A permit fee of \$5 will be charged. Victoria Marina can also provide permits and transportation to the island.

Isla Catalina near La Romana

This small island off the coast of La Romana has just a couple of pavilions and a restaurant, giving visitors the feeling of being on a near-deserted island. Far from the main dock is an area of virgin beach where camping is allowed. A permit must be obtained from the national parks office in Bayahibe, where shuttle boats to the island can also be hired.

For a different experience altogether, some campers ask permission from the village residents to sleep on beaches or from farmers to sleep in fields or mountains. This route often results in an invitation to the farmer's home for a Presidente and a home-cooked Dominican meal.

Canyoning and Cascading

Canyoning is a blend of hiking, swimming, rock climbing, jumping and repelling and usually ends with a dip in a cool mountain pool. The DR serves as an excellent arena for this relatively new adventure sport due to its multitude of mountain ranges. Adventure seekers staying on the north coast can easily find a tour or guide out of Cabarete, but the most popular access point is Jarabacoa in the central region.

A highlight for canyoning is the Jimenoa River area of the central region. Starting at the headwaters of the river, participants descend through canyons and end at Jimenoa falls. The riverbed winds down along the

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virgin woods that blanket this colossal mountain range. Additional favorite canyoning spots in the DR include:

- Arcoiris Canyon
- Arroyo Enriquillo
- Arroyo Blanco
- Lindo River
- Arroyo Atravesado
- La Sepa River
- Dulce Canyon
- Camu River
- Aguas Hondas
- Barraco Canyon
- Baiguate River

While Canyoning uses rock climbing ropes, harnesses and other technical equipment, *Cascading* is a variant that uses little equipment and requires the partaker to “cascade” by making multiple jumps with at least one through a waterfall and into the pool at its bottom. The Salto de Jimenoa waterfall is a recommended spot but the pinnacle cascading course is Damajagua, near Puerto Plata. This series of falls has 28 water jumps if the entire journey is completed.

Several tour operators have canyoning and cascading in their portfolio. The Dominican Canyon Club specializes in canyoning and has developed several one to two-day trips for those with or without previous experience. For more information visit www.dr-canyon.com or call (809) 242-0395.

Caving

There are hundreds of caves spread throughout the DR, the majority of which are located in the country’s numerous national parks. (For more information on where to find caves, see the National Parks backgrounder.)

Many tour companies offer caving excursions. Tours out of Punta Cana ride horseback through Los Haitises National Park to the mouth of “Fun Fun Cave.” Participants start the tour by descending on a rope with a free fall of more than 60 feet into the cave. Once in the dwelling, people can explore colorful tunnels and mystical underground rivers.

Fishing

(See Fishing backgrounder.)

Four-Wheeling/ATV

Several countryside tours offer a variety of transportation modes. Some have jeeps or mountain bikes, while others have monster trucks. Depending on levels of adventurism, an ATV may be the right

choice. Cruising on the rough roads of the Dominican countryside, the ATVs set course through tropical woods and rushing rivers. Riders are sure to get wet if not from the river, than by a visit to Baiguate and Jimenoa waterfalls on the Jarabacoa tour.

For those heading out of Punta Cana, the half-day adventure begins in Macao village and continues along the beach of the same name. Riders may want to jump in the ocean to cool down or lounge on the seven miles of unspoiled beach.

The Puerto Plata tour explores the slopes of Isabel de Torres mountain with a stop at a river for swimming. Several areas are visited including sugar cane plantations and a semi-desert beach called “Bergantin” for a second chance to swim.

Glass Bottom Boats

Available by an official tour operators, this is the fastest way to reach the reefs for snorkeling. It's also a great way to see the reefs if tourists prefer to stay dry. Visitors can expect to pay approximately \$15 per person. Glass bottom boats can also be arranged in Punta Cana through the hotels.

Helicopter Tours

The DR's coastlines are some of the most beautiful in the Caribbean thanks to an expansive coral system, unending beaches and lush jungle forests. And there's no better way to see it than by air. Helicopter tours from 10, 20 and 30 minutes are available throughout the country and some operators will create a personalized experience.

Hiking

Abundant trails line the countryside of the DR with the most famous leading to Pico Duarte. Most paths are located within the national parks system and require permits from the government in order to be explored. Some trails also request that a certifiable guide accompany hikers. Guides can often be secured near the entrances of the national parks. The most popular trails can be found at Jarabacoa, Constanza, Parque Nacional Monte Cristi, Pico Isabel del Torres, Punta Bonita, Parque Nacional del Este, San Rafael and Parque Nacional Bahoruco (For more information see the National Parks backgrounder.)

Horseback Riding

Many tours include horseback riding as a part of the transportation to reach points of interest. But for equestrians seeking a longer, more concentrated time with a horse, the northern mountain range of the DR can provide an ideal arena. Several companies have one-day tours using the strong Creole

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mountain breed of horse that will take riders over the mountains, through rivers and dense jungles and will stop along the way for waterfall and cave exploration.

Island Exploring

Isla Saona

The most popular section of Parque Nacional del Este, Isla Saona has been described as a “Robinson Crusoe” fantasy come true. Several tour operators have trips out of Punta Cana, Santo Domingo, La Romana and Bayahibe. Full-day tours to the island are available out of Puerto Plata and include a 40-minute flight to La Romana with a stop at the Mediterranean-styled village of Altos de Chavon.

Isla Catalina

Tours to Isla Catalina, a six-square mile island found in the Parque Nacional del Este, leave the port of La Romana by speed boat. Many of the tours also visit Altos de Chavon at Casa de Campo and Isla Saona. Tours to the area from Punta Cana travel via boat along the coastline.

Cayo Leventado

The six-square mile raised coral key is known as “Bacardi Island” having served as the backdrop for the company’s advertising campaign in the 1970s. Located in the Bay of Samana, the island features rich vegetation, fishing and snorkeling. Tours can be arranged out of Samana and Puerto Plata.

Cayo Arena

Also known as Cayo Paraiso, it’s one of the driest zones of the DR. Tours travel to the small fishing village of Punta Rusia and from there a boat is taken to the island. Colorful mangroves greet visitors as they disembark from the launch. This is a prime area for a chance to see a manatee - a mammal that inhabits the island. Other activities include sun worshipping on the sand and snorkeling or scuba diving among the network of 250 coral reefs. Tours are available out of Puerto Plata.

Jeep Safaris and Expeditions

Jeep Safaris and Expeditions place visitors behind the wheel of their own four-by-four Jeep or “fun truck” on the rustic roads of the DR. This is the best way to find secluded beaches and learn about local customs while being surrounded by lush vegetation. Tours are out of Samana, Punta Cana and Puerto Plata and often include horseback riding as an option.

Samana expeditions visit Las Terrenas and El Limon aboard “fun trucks.” This tour makes stops at El Limon waterfall; coffee, cacao and rubber plantations; and a 700 year old Ceibo tree (the oldest in the area). The Samana tour includes a trip up-river via canoe through dense mangroves.

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Bavaro expeditions travel through sugar cane plantations and rivers with majestic mountains in the distance. The group makes its way to the ranch “Uvero Alto” for traditional Dominican food served under coconut palms and an afternoon of sunbathing, hammocks, horses, and volleyball.

Puerto Plata expeditions start at the top of San Marcos’ Town Hill, an ancient and small village. The “fun truck” drives through sugar cane plantations on its way to the famous seven waterfalls called “Damajagua.” The group stops at a ranch for a flavorful Dominican meal.

Kayaking

Like whitewater rafting, kayaking is most popular in the central region along the Yaque del Norte and Jimenoa rivers near Jarabacoa. Both waterways provide a mix of white water with sharp turns and precipitous drops. Intermediate kayakers will enjoy the challenge of class III and IV rapids, while those with more experience can tackle the advanced sections of class V rapids.

Kiteboarding

One of the fastest growing water sports, this surfing-like activity uses a huge kite to capture the wind as participants balance on a board. Kiteboarding rentals are available up and down Kite Beach in Cabarete, considered the sport’s world capital. Visitors looking to try the sport can easily find experienced kiteboarders offering instruction. A variety of techniques are used at the schools including radio helmets during instruction so immediate feedback is provided to the student for quicker learning and more time on the board.

Monster Trucks and Off Road Runners

Very popular with visitors of all ages, Monster Truck and Runner tours provide a unique opportunity to explore the DR countryside while getting a first-hand glimpse of Dominican living. Different from the Jeep or Expedition tours, someone else does the driving while riders sit back and enjoy the view – and the bumps.

The tours include lunch and an option to purchase locally made Dominican products including cigars, coffee and rum. Tours can easily be arranged at hotels throughout Punta Cana, Bayahibe and Santo Domingo.

While both tours visit quaint villages, a countryside school, a variety of plantations and an opportunity to taste various fruits and coffee, each has its own unique stop.

The tour out of Santo Domingo visits the small town of Bayaguana. Along the way, the Monster Truck passes through lemon, coffee and cacao plantations with a stop at a waterfall for a cool dip in the swimming hole.

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***Insider's Tip:**

While not expected, many tourists bring gifts, clothes and treats for the children met along the way.

Mountain Biking

Mountain biking is one of the quietest and most exhilarating ways to see the DR. The bikes allow tourists to reach places not accessible to most visitors. Several tour companies, such as Iguana Mama, offer one-day to multi-day tours out of Cabarete.

Parks

(See National Parks backgrounder.)

Pico Duarte

Climbing Pico Duarte is not for the weak. With a peak reaching 10,128 feet above sea level, the mountain is the highest in the Caribbean. As part of the "Dominican Alps," the climb is strenuous but achievable, especially with the assistance of a guide and a mule to carry packs up the mountain. While the guide is required, the mule is optional though highly recommended. Both can be arranged at the village of La Cienaga just outside the Armando Bermudez National Park. The walk to the top of the mountain and back usually takes three days from the village.

Guides and mules can be hired at the village of La Cienaga, just outside the park's entrance. Some tour operators have three, four and five-day packages that include accommodations, mule and food.

Rock Climbing

The DR is considered to be one of the world's best rock climbing destinations among those who know the rope. With four mountain ranges, the country provides a great landscape for adrenaline.

One of the best spots is Playa El Fronton, which is easily accessible by boat from Las Galeras. Climbers hire a boat for around \$30 that will take them to a drop-off point and wait until their return.. Other popular areas for rock climbing are Parque Mirador del Este near Santo Domingo and Barahona in the southwest region.

Sandboarding

Another new sport appearing on the horizon is sandboarding. Requiring a modified snowboard, the sport uses sand as its platform. Two areas in the DR are quickly becoming known to sandboarding enthusiasts. One locale is the yellow sand of the Bani Dunes area located in the southwest region about one to two hours west of Santo Domingo. The other area nearby is Las Salinas with approximately 10-square miles of virgin dunes.

Scuba and Snorkeling

(See Scuba Diving and Snorkeling backgrounder.)

Speed Boats

A fast-paced adventure from Punta Cana, these speed boats are small zippy two-seat racers. A few tour operators have their own private deck in the ocean where tour participants can go for a bit of solitude and excellent snorkeling. The tour operators recommend bringing bread or fruit for the fish as they have been known to eat out of snorkelers' hands.

Surfing

Just a five minute car ride outside of Cabarete is Playa Encuentro, a beach known throughout the country for great surfing conditions. Boards and lessons are available through a variety of tour companies in Cabarete. Each provides the board, instruction and transportation to and from Cabarete.

Additional surfing spots include Playas Grande and Preciosa beach just east of Rio San Juan and Playa Boba north of Nagua. These are challenging spots and are recommended for experienced surfers because most do not have a lifeguard.

Swim with Dolphins

(See Family Activities backgrounder under Ocean World Park.)

Waterfalls

Salto de Jimenoa

Located in Jarabacoa National Park, this 131-foot waterfall is reached by a hiking trail and narrow suspension bridge. The cold water of the Yaque del Norte cascades into the pool below. Lush vegetation surrounds the rocky canyon area. On weekends, a snack bar is open for visitors.

Admission fee: \$0.50. Open 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

Salto Aqua Blanca

Located in Jarabacoa National Park, this 492-foot waterfall is one of the highest in the Caribbean. Tours are offered through a variety of area operators.

El Limon

Found in the Samana area near the town of El Limon, this stunning waterfall is accessible by horse. The ride takes two and one-half hours round trip and visitors can expect to pay \$12. Most excursion outfits will prepare lunch for an additional nominal fee. As the falls come into sight, the horses are

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tethered at a small station where drinks are provided before making the rest of the trek on foot to the swimming hole at the base of the thundering and picturesque El Limon falls.

Damajagua Falls aka Cascades of Imbert

Also known as the “seven falls,” this is a series of 27 cascades near Puerto Plata. The currents can be strong so it is not recommended for children or weak swimmers. Swim, climb up narrow limestone canyons then jump or water-slide down. Water shoes are suggested because of the slippery conditions.

Whale watching

From January through March, Samana Bay is nearly taken over by humpback whales. For centuries, thousands of these humungous mammals make an annual trip to spend winter in the warm waters of the DR. Tours from Samana Bay are available during this time and most offer a 99 percent sighting rate. (For more information, see the Northeast Coast backgrounder.)

White-water rafting

White water flows from the mountains through canyons and jungle and out to sea. The hottest white water rafting location is on the Yaque del Norte in the central mountain area. This is the largest river in the DR and has exhilarating class III to V rapids (using the universal scale of I to VI) including a 12-foot drop named “Mike Tyson.” For a whitewater experience, Rancho Baiguata and Rancho Jarabacoa, as well as several other operators, offer one-day tours out of Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata and Cabarete and all include instruction and equipment. There are some tours that have options for multiple days and include sleeping along the river. Most tours will only allow adults and children over 12 years of age who are in good health.

Windsurfing

Cabarete of the north coast is considered the world capital of windsurfing. It draws many competitions in the World Cup Windsurfing Competition held every June. Equipment is available for rental through most hotels in the area and lessons can be had through a variety of vendors. Two of the main providers in Cabarete are the Carib Bic Center, which has been providing instruction and boards for nearly 20 years, and Iguana Mama. For those starting out, the calmer waters of the south are an excellent training ground.