

**NATIONAL PARKS**

*Version: October 2005*

**Contact:**

BVK Public Relations

Laura Tanin: 414.351.9563 or [laurat@bvk.com](mailto:laurat@bvk.com)

Patty Tazalla: 414.247.2174 or [ptazalla@bvk.com](mailto:ptazalla@bvk.com)

With colors straight out of a crayon box and landscapes too diverse and magnificent for words, the Dominican Republic (DR) provides a picture-perfect view, regardless of where the spectator stands. Proud of its beauty and careful to maintain it, the DR government has taken a very systematic approach to ensuring these colors do not fade for future generations. Setting aside 20 percent of the country's land for preservation has resulted in 83 areas: 19 national parks, six scientific reserves, 32 natural monuments, 15 natural reserves, two marine sanctuaries and nine protected parcels of islands also called panoramic views.

From tropical forests to semi-deserts, the DR is comprised of various climate conditions, the largest being sub-tropical moist and sub-tropical dry forests. Four mountain ranges elevate the island and are capped by four of the tallest peaks in the Caribbean: Pico Duarte at 10,128 feet above sea level (ASL), La Pelona at 10,072 feet ASL, La Rucilla at 9,990 feet ASL and Pico Yaque at 9,055 feet ASL. However, being the tallest isn't its only colossal claim. The DR also has the lowest point in the Caribbean at 144 feet below sea level at Lake Enriquillo.

These mountain ranges, valleys, deserts, lakes and islands serve as home to 5,600 plant species. Thirty-six percent of the country's floral species are endemic, meaning they are found nowhere else on the planet, of which, 300 endemic orchids have been identified. The DR even has an endemic palm tree called the "manacle palm."

Of the 303 bird species living in the DR, 27 are endemic, including the yellow and brown Hispaniola woodpecker and the narrow-billed tody. Many of the birds are also listed as endangered or threatened throughout the world. One bird, listed as critical, is the Ridgway's hawk.

Other creatures also call the DR's national parks home including 300 species of butterflies and 33 land mammals. Many naturalists will hope to get a peek of the endangered solenodonte, a small shrew-like critter with a long nose that eats ants. The hutia, a small gerbil-like rodent, is also rarely seen. Much larger than these tiny beings are the American crocodile, reaching lengths of 15 feet, and the rhinoceros iguana which grows to four feet and gets its name from the horn-like bump on its nose.

Several marine areas have been classified as national parks and many animals have found refuge here

*MORE*



where 14 percent of the world's coral reefs reside. Six of the world's seven marine turtles live in the DR including the mammoth leatherback which can grow to over six feet and weigh 800 pounds. In addition, the endangered Antillean manatee, humpback whale and bottlenose dolphin are often observed in the DR's bays.

While the country has invested a significant amount of time and funds to conservation efforts, it has established several partnerships with internationally recognized environmental organizations to further this cause. In 1984, the DR joined the Caribbean Conservation Association. Since 1990, the Cornell International Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development (CIIFAD) has worked in the DR to develop strategies for managing agricultural and ecological resources, with particular emphasis on the Los Haitises National Park and the coastal border region of Samaná Bay. CIIFAD recently received a grant from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) to further its work. And, the Nature Conservancy is collaborating with local DR organizations to protect the island's areas with a current emphasis on the Madre de las Aguas Conservation area in the west. It also has programs at Parque Nacional del Este with funding from the Rescue the Reef (RTR) program.

### **Park Entry & Fees**

Although entrance fees to the national parks vary from location to location, the amount is nominal ranging from \$1 to \$5. Guides are nearly always mandatory and fees can usually be negotiated. When exploring the national parks, authorities recommend having the appropriate gear on hand: shoes with proper traction, layered clothing for temperature changes at different elevations, flashlight for descending into caves, binoculars for birdwatching, insect repellent and water.

### **Parks**

While the DR has over two dozen national parks, several have become favorites among naturalists, amateur archeologists and adventuresome souls.

#### ***Los Haitises National Park***

Across the bay at Samana, Los Haitises is known for its delicate and ecologically diverse mangrove coast, the largest in the DR. Throughout the 83-square mile park, rock formations, pictographs and petroglyphs can be discovered in its three cave systems. The average temperature is 77 F with a humid climate and frequent rainfall in the two major life zones of wet forest and subtropical rainforest. Hispaniola parrots, owls and gannets can be spotted along with solenodonte and hutia.

Tours are available out of El Portillo for approximately \$65 and include lunch.

*MORE*

### **Jaragua National Park**

This is the largest of the national parks with over 560 square miles of protected area. Therefore, Jaragua has one of the largest bird populations in the DR with over 130 species, 10 of which are endemic and half aquatic. It's here at Oviedo Lagoon that the largest population of pink flamingos find sanctuary.

Parts of the park receive little rainfall and are desert-like with a dry, thorn-forest and high population of cacti. A large number of caverns are speckled throughout the park where pre-Columbian pictographs and petroglyphs are preserved. Eleven species of bats also find protection in the dark caves. One animal to note is the endemic Jaragua gecko, a tiny reptile measuring only 1.6 centimeters long, which was discovered in 1998.

The main park office is east of the town of Oviedo. There are no tourist facilities and no guided tours.

### **National Park Isla Cabritos**

Although it is the largest of the three islands found in Lake Enriquillo, Isla Cabritos means "little goats island." The park is seven and one-half miles long and is situated at the center of the large salt-water lake. The other two islands, Barbarita and Islita, are rarely visited.

The most significant animal inhabitants to be found here is one of the world's largest American crocodile populations. While the prehistoric reptiles can be seen from the lake's shores, the best way to see them up close is by boat. Visitors to the park must pay an entrance and boat fee, which is approximately \$60 regardless of the number of people aboard. Tourists may want to share the cost of the boat with other visitors.

Once aboard, the ride takes about 30 minutes to reach the island. The visitor's center on the island has information about the region's history and geology. No unguided visits to the island are allowed.

The entrance to the park is a little over one mile east of the town of La Descubierta.

*Insider's Tip: The best time to view American crocodile is early morning or late afternoon when they come out of the water to warm up in the sun. During the day, they escape the heat by retreating to the waters.*

### **Armando Bermudez National Park**

Established in 1956, this was the first national park in the DR. It is still considered the most popular due to

*MORE*

its 10,128-foot tall Pico Duarte. Located within the northern Cordillera Central and, the 306 square mile park shares Pico Duarte with Jose del Carmen Ramirez National Park.

Cooler than other areas of the DR, the average temperature ranges from 54 F to 70 F. In December and January the temperature can drop to 32 F in the early morning. Climbing Pico Duarte is an objective for many who make the pilgrimage and requires a multi-day trek with camping along the trails. (For more information, see the Eco and Adventure Tourism background.)

Twelve of the country's rivers flow through Armando Bermudez and Jose del Carmen National Parks thus qualifying the areas as subtropical rainforest. The park's wild boar, solenodonte and hutia may be spotted drinking from the cool streams.

#### ***Jose Del Carmen Ramirez National Park***

Occupying 306 square miles, this park is known for its prevailing low temperatures ranging from 53 F to 65 F. Freezes and frosts occur in the Valle del Telero area where temperatures of 39 F to below zero have been recorded.

Many pre-Columbian pictographs and petroglyphs can be found carved in rock in the Tetero Valley. This is also an area where white-necked crow and loggerhead flycatcher bird species can be seen roosting in the branches of local pine and wide-leaf conifers.

The main park office is in the town of Sabaneta near San Juan de la Maguana. Another point of access is from Los Frios.

#### ***Sierra del Bahoruco National Park***

The arid southwestern portion of the DR is considered an excellent example of climatic stability with a geological foundation of carbonated substratum. An area of interest to many scientists and botanists, the limestone sub-terrain is sedimentary rock that contains important species of algae. The park also contains the Bahia de Caldera National Monument which was established to protect the great Las Salinas sand dunes from erosion.

Orchid lovers will find Sierra del Bahoruco heavenly with 166 species, 32 of which are known to be endemic to this particular park. Nineteen endemic species of birds also flourish here including the rolita, pajaro bobo and the stolid flycatcher.

*MORE*

A very remote park with few surrounding tourist facilities, most visits require a four-wheel-drive vehicle to explore the crystallized limestone peaks.

***Parque Nacional del Este***

The principal highlights of this 178 square mile marine park are its more than 200 caves and Isla Saona where endangered West Indian manatee and bottlenose dolphins can be seen from time to time.

There are no rivers or streams in the park and the mainland is heavily wooded with subtropical humid forest to dry forest. This clustering of trees creates a safe habitat for 112 species of birds including the endemic ash-faced owl and Hispaniolan lizard-cuckoo.

The majority of the park takes up the DR's southeastern peninsula near Bayahibe whose coastline is well known for coral formations and internationally renowned dive sites. The southernmost tip is Calderas Bay where saltwater lagoons and mangrove swamps are found. Opposite of the bay is Isla Saona, a 15-mile-long island with two small settlements: Mano Juan and Punta Gorda with a total population of 300 people. To the west is the smaller, uninhabited Isla Catalina. (For more information on the two islands see the East Coast and/or Eco and Adventure Tourism backgrounders.)

Permits can be arranged at the parks department in Bayahibe or from one of the tour operators. The two entrances to the park include the western entrance at Bayahibe and the eastern entrance just past the village of Boca del Yuma.

***Monte Cristi National Park***

Located at the extreme northwest of the DR, the Monte Cristi National Park partially borders Haiti. One of the driest regions in the DR, it only receives two and three-sixths inches of rain per year. The most sought after area for explorers is the Cayos Siete Hermanos Keys, also known as Seven Brothers Keys, which is a desert. The other notable landmark is the 777-foot limestone mesa called El Morro. This enormous stone entity is the habitat for an endemic plant species called *sabia montecristini* as well as 10 species of reptiles including the American crocodile.

There are no marked trails but it is relatively easy to explore El Morro on foot. Access to the coastal areas will require a boat. The park office is a couple of miles out of Monte Cristi at the base of El Morro.

*MORE*

***Parque Histórico La Isabela***

Consistently listed in the DR's top ten most visited protected areas, La Isabela has important historical significance as the first European settlement in the New World.

The historical site is divided into three zones: two civilian and one military known as El Castillo. It is here that excavations have revealed the outlines of what experts believe were Columbus' house, the church where the first mass of the New World was held and an observation tower.

There is no easy way to reach this national park. The most direct route is to take a "gua-gua," a countryside public bus, from Puerto Plata to Imbert, then another to Luperon. From here, take a motorcoach to La Isabela. An easier route is an organized tour.

***Isabel de Torres National Park***

South of Puerto Plata, this nine square mile reserve is located on a hill that rises to 2,640 feet ASL. On top of the mountain, above the 15 subterranean rivers and brooks, is a statue of Christ (Cristo Redentor) with outstretched arms, similar to the one in Rio de Janeiro. The area is accessible by cable car from Puerto Plata. (See the North Coast background.)

The botanical garden, also located atop the mountain, houses a variety of tropical vegetation and many birds, including the Hispaniolan parrot, plain pigeon, limpkin and red-tailed hawk.

***La Caleta Submarine National Park***

Fourteen miles off the coast of Santo Domingo, "The Hickory" was purposely sunk in 1984 by the Group of Submarine Investigations (GIS) to create an artificial reef for marine life and to promote proliferation. A second wreck, "The George" was sunk near the Hickory and lies 100 feet below sea level.

Divers are able to explore the wrecks, while snorkelers can swim among the numerous coral reefs accessible from the park's beach. The land portion of the park contains an excavated Taino cemetery discovered on the beach in the 1970's. Recently, the park received funding from the United Nations Development Programme for its continued conservation efforts.

The underwater park can be reached from Boca Chica via speed boat in 17 minutes or 25 minutes by a slower boat from the public park on Las Americas highway.

*MORE*

**National Parks Offices**

Dominican Republic National Parks Office  
Av Independencia 539 esq Cervantes  
Santo Domingo (Apartado Postal 2487)  
Eoturisa, Santiago 203, B

The Ecotourism Department of the National Parks Office  
Located next to Santo Domingo's zoological gardens  
(809) 472-3717  
Offices open 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**National Park Accommodations**

Many parks provide the option to camp with permission from the national parks office.

Several hotels specialize in eco-tourism accommodations for those that want to stay in the center of nature. These hotels have arranged tours and activities to many of the national parks.

Rancho Guaraguao

Las Neblinas, Constanza - Jarabacao area

(Approximately two hours from Santo Domingo)

Offers 35 cabins in various architectural styles and sizes. All include cable tv, telephone, refrigerator and coffee makers. Some have kitchens, fireplace and Jacuzzi.

Restaurant on premise. Additional amenities include bar, game room, mini market, and gym.

Phone: (809) 508-3333

Email: [mercadeo@ranchoguaraguao.com](mailto:mercadeo@ranchoguaraguao.com)

Website: [www.ranchoguaraguao.com](http://www.ranchoguaraguao.com)

###