

## **SOUTHWEST REGION OVERVIEW**

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### **Contact:**

BVK Public Relations

Vanessa Welter: 414.247.3808 or [vwelter@bvk.com](mailto:vwelter@bvk.com)

Sonja Loges: 414.247.2121 or [sloges@bvk.com](mailto:sloges@bvk.com)

[www.godominicanrepublic.com](http://www.godominicanrepublic.com)

If the Dominican Republic (DR) has a well-kept secret, the western region of the country is it. Including the area west of Santo Domingo, the western region remains undiscovered by many tourists. Despite this, many hotel developers have begun to scout locations for future projects. It is therefore wise that visitors seeking areas less traveled to experience this peaceful region before it becomes a popular destination. While commercial flights from the United States do not fly daily into the west—yet, the farthest part of the region is only about a three hour drive from Santo Domingo or Santiago airports.

Although the DR provides a change of scenery at just about every turn, this region is the most ecologically diverse. Two salt water lakes, one being the largest in the Caribbean, provide a haven for massive populations of birds and reptiles. And while some sections of the area are mountain rainforest, other parts are pine forest and arid desert.

### **Top Attractions**

#### **Polo Magnetico**

A peculiar area where bottles and cars roll uphill, defying the laws of gravity.

#### **Lake Enriquillo**

The largest salt water lake in the Caribbean it is a grand location to discover flamingos and American crocodiles. Lake Enriquillo also happens to be the lowest point in the Caribbean at approximately 150 feet below sea level.

#### **Bani and Las Salinas**

This land of salt mines and sand dunes, the largest of its kind in the Caribbean. Besides Cabarete in the north, this is the best place to windsurf and is less crowded.

#### **National Parks**

There are eight national parks or reserves in the south western region of the DR including the country's largest, Parque Nacional Jaragua.

#### **Bani Area**

This area's beaches are different from the others of the DR with grey sand for digging toes into instead of white or yellow. Fishing villages, markets and friendly people populate this less traveled section. Coffee connoisseurs will want to stop at the Museo del Café Dominicano for a history lesson on the rich coffee that Dominicans typically serve with plenty of sugar in a small espresso cup.

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The Bani Dunes, the largest in the Caribbean with 10 square miles of yellow sand, are a hidden nature gem to tourists. Pursuers of a new extreme sport known as sandboarding know about the dunes for their beauty and small crowds.

Nearby is the town of Las Salinas. Besides Cabarete in the north, this is the best area for windsurfing in the country and is more laid-back than its northern counterpart. While exploring the fishing town of Las Salinas, tourists may want to visit its dreamlike, bleach-white salt gardens. Protected as a national monument, the small peninsula of salt looks like a blanket of fresh snow as it extends out into the sea.

### **Barahona**

Just three hours west of Santo Domingo lies the remote, relaxed, and remarkable town of Barahona. Founded in 1802, the region became a recognized fishing town and agricultural city famous for its large plantains and vast collection of coffee and sugar. However, the town itself is not what draws people to this natural environment. Here, spectacular cliffs make the ultimate backdrop to secluded beaches and streams. The people of Barahona are warm and inviting and its coastlines are calm and unspoiled.

Amongst the more notable characteristics of Barahona are the very rural, modest surroundings. Besides a few disco clubs scattered throughout the area, there is nothing glitzy about the southwest region. Here, locals dwell in the famous “tejemani” style of houses, built with intertwining sticks and branches.

Perhaps it is for the seclusion and slow-pace that visitors are so eager to return. The wealth of Barahona lies not in individual belongings, but the beauty and heart of the people and surroundings.

*Insider's Tip: Beach strollers are advised to bring comfortable walking shoes, as the beaches closest to Barahona are rocky.*

### **Pedernales**

This small fishing village serves as a portal to several different areas and adventures. Two of the country's major national parks, Parque Nacional Jaragua to the southwest and Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco to the north, serve as borders, making the village an excellent base camp for hikers. Pedernales also provides easy access for those visitors wishing to explore Haiti, whose border is just to the west. Two rarely visited islands are just a boat ride away from the village: Alto Velo and Isla Beata. The rocky, scrub-brush environment of Isla Beata sets the scene for Taino caves which features enough rock art to fill a coffee table book. Alto Velo has been referred to as a giant stone sailboat protruding out of the water. The high rocky land of this small island provides habitat for the world's smallest reptile, the dwarf gecko measuring less than two centimeters across, or the size of a Dominican peso coin.

### **Parque Nacional Jaragua**

The largest protected area in the DR, Parque Nacional Jaragua is 600 square miles of arid land with only a fraction of it accessible to tourists. There are a few areas that are on the list of must-sees for nature lovers. One of these is Laguna de Oviedo, a six-mile-long saltwater lagoon that provides sanctuary for the largest year-round flamingo population in the DR. In addition to these pink creatures, bird lovers will be in paradise with over 130 species to track including roseate spoonbills, herons and brown pelicans.

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### **Lake Enriquillo and Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos**

Translating to “little goats island,” Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos is the largest of three islands within the 26-mile-long Lake Enriquillo. The sandy island is scattered with cactus and massive rhinoceros iguanas that can easily be tempted with food from visitors.

Situated approximately 150 feet below sea level, Lake Enriquillo is not only both the lowest point and largest saltwater lake in the Caribbean, but also home to the Caribbean’s largest population of American crocodile. Beyond the ancient reptiles, the lake serves as a sanctuary for bright pink flocks of flamingos and hundreds of other birds.

Boats to Isla Cabritos depart from La Descubierta near the lake’s northwest tip.

*Insider’s tip: Boat operators to Isla Cabritos charge by the trip, not per person. For extra value, look for other travelers wanting to visit the island and share a boat.*

### **Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco**

A mountainous park with the same semi-desert environment as Jaragua and Cabritos, Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco features larimar mines where the beautiful blue gem of the Caribbean is harvested.

### **Polo Magnetico**

Located approximately half way between the towns of Polo and Cabral is a very unusual phenomena where bottles and cars roll uphill instead of down. One of only 29 of these known “gravity hills” on the planet, Polo Magnetico is a spot for the curious. While not well marked, the place can often be identified by the number of people looking closely at cans on the road. Do the items actually roll against gravity or is it an optical illusion? Ask the locals, as they love to take visitors to the area and watch their reactions.

### **San Cristobal**

The first major city west of Santo Domingo, San Cristobal is considered by many to be a small version of the capital. The city of 170,000 thrives on its sugar cane mills and herb fields. Its arid ground and mountain background serve as a gateway to the “wild west.” Just south of San Cristobal is the village of Nigua where 16<sup>th</sup>-century and 18<sup>th</sup>-century ruins of sugar mills can be explored.

For a more Indiana Jones-like experience, head north from San Cristobal. The Cuevas de Borbon is a series of 40 connecting caves including the Cuevas de El Pomier, a particular section that has more than 5,000 petroglyphs and several thousand Amerindian wall paintings. Bring a flashlight to spot the thousands of bats that make the cave their home.

### **San Rafael**

South of Barahona is a beach area known as San Rafael. And while the surf is vivacious, a natural infinity swimming pool awaits visitors. Water slowly trickles into the sea over an unobtrusive manmade barrier while the pool is filled naturally by a waterfall from the Rio Nizalto. Public showers and bathroom facilities are maintained and camping on the beach is a viable option. After a day of swimming, seafood shacks serve up grilled lobster and fresh fish.

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