

Dominican Republic

- 🌴 Justifiably famous beaches, hidden villages and cloud-forest treks
- ✈ Fly UK-Santo Domingo via Madrid (12hrs)
- 📅 Nov-Apr: cooler walks, whalewatching; May-July: sunny - great for flamingos



BLOSSOMING RELATIONSHIP

With pristine beaches, cloud-forest treks and welcoming villages, it's no surprise this Caribbean country is winning lots of admirers

Words & Pictures **Ed Stocker**

As good as it gets
Lying down the coast from Barahona, picture perfect San Rafael beach now features on many DR visitors' 'must see' list

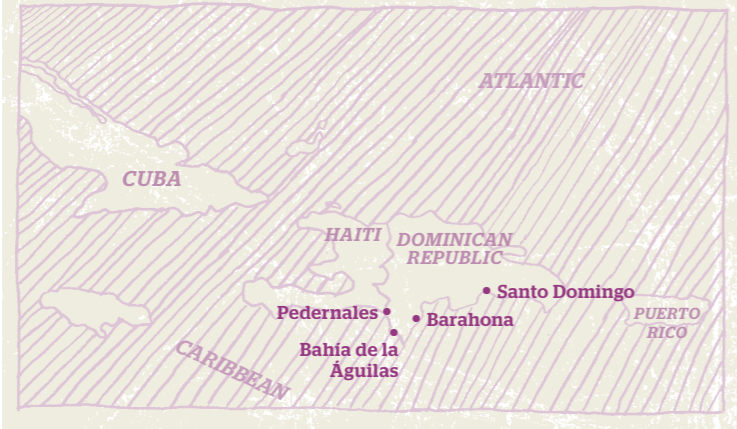
It was a languid evening of rum drinking and dancing. Except... I was the only one not dancing. I was trying my best, believe me, but the end result came out as an unconvincing limb flail. The sun had long set over the town of Barahona and I'd found myself at a car wash, not the most obvious location for a night out. But in the Dominican Republic these places transform at night into vast open-air dance halls – all bright lights and intertwined couples. Oversized stacks of speakers are the name of the game, pumping out the latest bachata and merengue hits, the Caribbean nation's music of choice.

“No, no, no. You have to move like this.” My new-found Dominican friend next to me refused to give up his impromptu training session, despite my wails of protest. Cuba may get all the press when it comes to music but it's hard to think of a nation quite so enamoured as here. No *colmado* (a grocery store-cum-bar) is complete without the obligatory sound system, and everyone I met on my travels, from mountain villager to savvy urbanite, had a vast back-catalogue of song lyrics in their heads tackling those age-old Latino leitmotifs of love, won and lost.

Border patrol

The Dominican Republic is an incredibly diverse place, boasting the highest peak in the Caribbean, sparkling lagoons, exotic wildlife and pristine shores. Rather unfairly, though, it has a reputation for being a bit of a one-trick beach-holiday pony. But away from the all-inclusive resorts at Punta Cana in the east and Puerto Plata in the north, a more beguiling picture emerges – beginning with the charms of the capital, Santo Domingo, and its colonial centre.

The first city in the Americas, Santo Domingo was founded in 1496 by Bartholmew Columbus, brother of the better-known Christopher. From here I picked up a 4x4 and headed out along the Avenida George Washington, the Caribbean Sea shimmering to my left. Despite the views, macabre events have taken place here: the country's brutal dictator Rafael Trujillo was



assassinated on this stretch of tarmac back in 1961, releasing Dominicans from 30 years of tyranny.

I headed first for the southwestern nugget of the Dominican Republic, close to the border with Haiti. The southwest is the poorest part of the country, sprinkled with towns of small houses, street vendors and national lottery outlets known as *bancas* painted in fluorescent colours. It's also a microcosm of everything the Dominican Republic has to offer. Amazingly, though, the area remains largely off the tourist radar and hasn't seen the same infrastructure investment and construction as other places. This means the discerning traveller can have the virgin beaches and tranquil trekking trails virtually to oneself.

My first stop was the small community of Cachote, an example of the country's tentative yet increasing engagement with eco-tourism. To get here I'd turned inland off Highway 44 – the coastal road – at La Cienaga, and headed up an unpaved track for 15km, rising to about 1,300m above sea level. The coast had been warm and humid, but the air cooled significantly as I climbed.

Cachote has a small guesthouse, three basic cabins and a communal dining area where meals revolve around the Dominican staples of *yuca* (a starchy root veg) and plantain. For visitors, this is a chance to see what rural life is all about. For the villagers, it's an additional source of income beyond the pittance people make in agriculture.

In the evening, I sat outside with the *campesinos* under a star-filled sky, sharing life stories and divvying up a bottle of Dominican rum to stave off the post-sunset chill. ➤



LOCAL VIEW
Ramón Medina
Guide, 32, Cachote
“When visitors arrive, it's the villagers who receive them. Visitors get to know how we live and our quality of life improves as a result.”

From clockwise:
The streets of Santo Domingo throng to the sound of speakers and sports; a mischievous devil wields a noisy (and painful!) vejiga; a trek guide loads up his mule with supplies for the journey

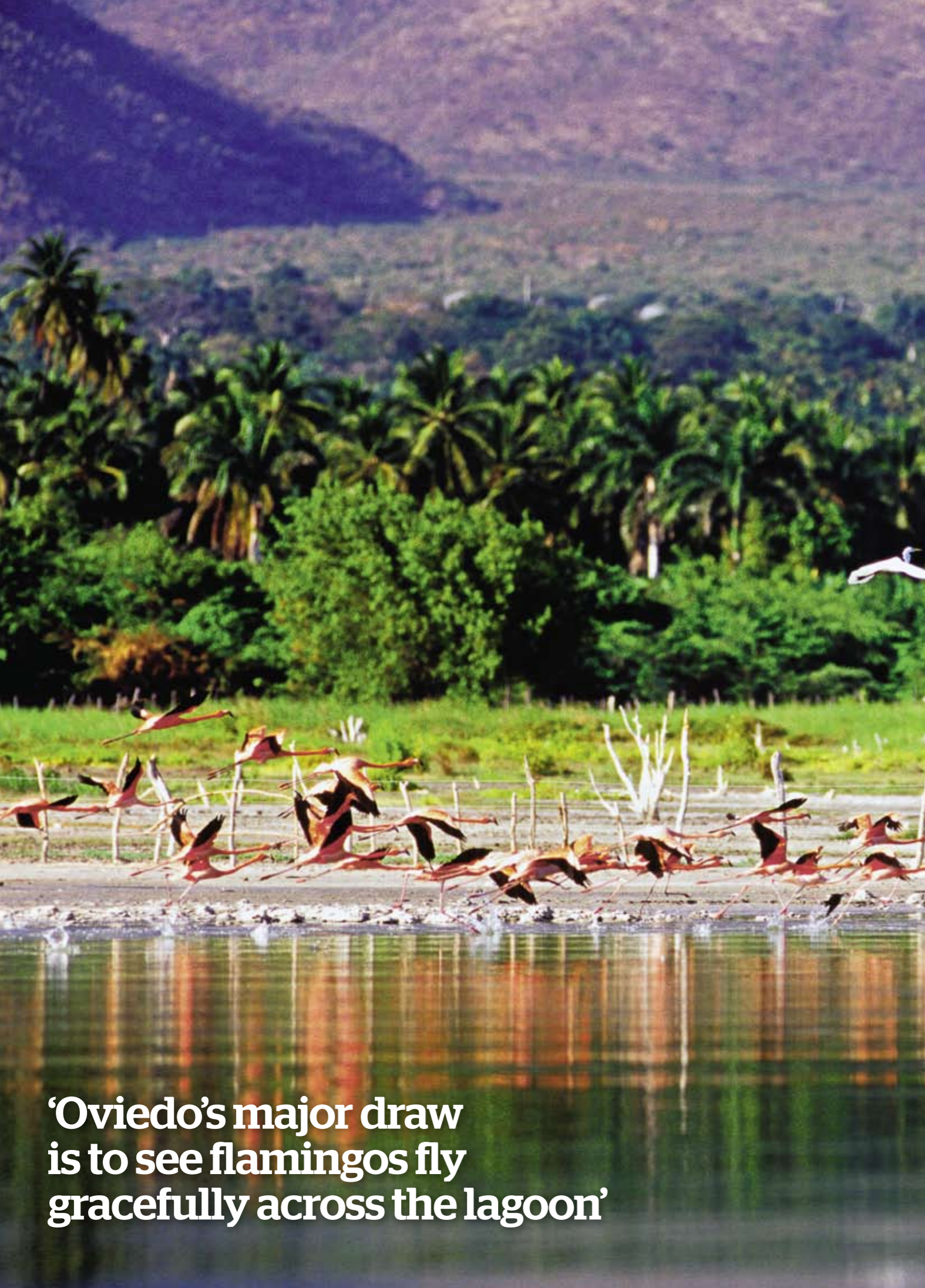


‘No grocery store is complete without a sound system’



SONG AND DANCE

● If you're in Santo Domingo on a Sunday evening, head to the San Francisco ruins (in the old town) for an outdoor concert of old-school music – mostly *son* and *bolero* – from bang-on-the-money crooners Grupo Bonyé. Marvel at couples twirling around a makeshift stage and have a go yourself.
● The annual Carnaval in La Vega (Sundays in February), not far from Jarabacoa, is also not to be missed and the painted costumes and colourful masks are stunning. Watch out for the *vejiga* – a rubber ball on a string that processions swing at the crowd. It hurts.



‘Oviedo’s major draw is to see flamingos fly gracefully across the lagoon’

Paradise found
The Bahía de las Águilas is as beautiful as it is little visited

◀ Don Francisco is the elder of the village at 88 and bought the land here back in 1952 for a mere 100 pesos.

The next day was a fuzzy-headed early start in order to trek through Cachote’s impressive cloud forest while the air was still cool. My guide was Ramón Medina, at 32 one of the younger members of the village. A hazy mist hung low over the trees, soon to dissipate under a persuasive sun. The dense woodland is actually a secondary forest, the original having been cut down for fuel by villagers. Now a protected area, its ecological value is huge: five rivers have their source here and there are over 20 species of bird, including the elusive jilguero, a type of goldfinch with an other-worldly song that sounds, bizarrely, like a wind chime.

Returning to the coast, I was greeted by water of a ridiculously deep turquoise, the bays fringed by flowering bougainvillea. Back on Highway 44, I followed the road past the village of Enriquillo, round to the dusty frontier town of Pedernales. It’s a great base from which to explore Bahía de las Águilas, a drop-dead gorgeous beach only accessible by fishing boat.

Not a lot happens in Pedernales, yet there’s something about the place. Perhaps it’s the simple day-to-day rhythm of life, or the border town feel, where two ethnically and linguistically different nations – the

Dominican Republic and Haiti – eye each other across a ramshackle frontier. Or maybe it’s wandering down to the *malecón*, the beachside promenade, in the evening and playing dominos with the locals.

Pure shores

The departure point for Bahía de las Águilas is about 30 minutes’ drive from Pedernales. Boats to the bay depart from Cuevas de las Águilas, a small beach with a lone restaurant and a cluster of fisherman huts set back from the sea. Visitors can pitch up with a tent, although there’s little by way of amenities. A few years ago, there was nothing here, the restaurant owner Santiago Rodríguez explained, but slowly the area is changing. In the future the fishermen huts will be available for rent,

he added, but there’s no doubt the area remains wonderfully wild.

Santiago put on a serious spread for lunch: rice mixed with brown beans (*moro*), plantain fritters known as *tostones* and avocado – alongside the local catch. I tucked into succulent lobster grilled with garlic, but Santiago, with a wave of his hands, insisted on more food. “You have to try our house speciality. It’s our take on *mofongo* [a Dominican national dish]” he told me. “We call it *bahíafongo*.” Moments later an impressive mound of once-fried and mashed plantain arrived on a plate, hollowed out in the middle and stuffed with crab.

As you’d expect in a country renowned for its coastline, I visited some impressive beaches: from Punta Rucia in the northwest to Playa Rincón in the east, often hailed as the best spot in the country. But everything paled in comparison to Bahía de las Águilas. After a 10-minute boat ride from the restaurant, past a rocky inlet known as Lovers’ Cove (cue a wink from the fisherman at the motor) we arrived. Here was a genuine haven: a vast strip of sand, calm swimming-pool-clear water and just two other visitors at the other end of the beach. Swimming and reading were what life was all about here – until the fishermen returned to whisk me back to reality. ▶



LOCAL VIEW

Paul Temple, bar/restaurant owner, 61, Constanza

“The central cordillera has seemingly limitless vistas to adore. The area is blessed with a sub-tropical climate that’s surprisingly cool, unique in the Caribbean.”



Clockwise from above: The endangered rhinoceros iguana guards its territory; mist shrouds the peak of Pico Duarte, the Caribbean's highest peak; a plate of bahiáfono (plantain stuffed with fresh crab)



◀ My plan now was to head north into the interior, but in order to do that I had to turn back on myself first, retracing the coast road back in the direction of Enriquillo. It gave me a chance to call in on the Laguna de Oviedo, an impressive saltwater lagoon that's a major feeding ground for much of the country's wildlife.

The only other people there on my visit were a group of local schoolchildren packed into the visitor centre watching an educational video. It is extraordinary that while the resorts are packed to the hilt, natural wonders like Oviedo remain virtually unknown. The park is just under 30 sq km and the milky-green water is dotted with some 24 little islands (known as *cayos*). Like many people working in tourism in the region, the staff at Oviedo, which sits within the Jaragua National Park, are former fisherman.

Fresh-faced guide Melvin González chatted passionately about the surrounding area as we bounced across the water in



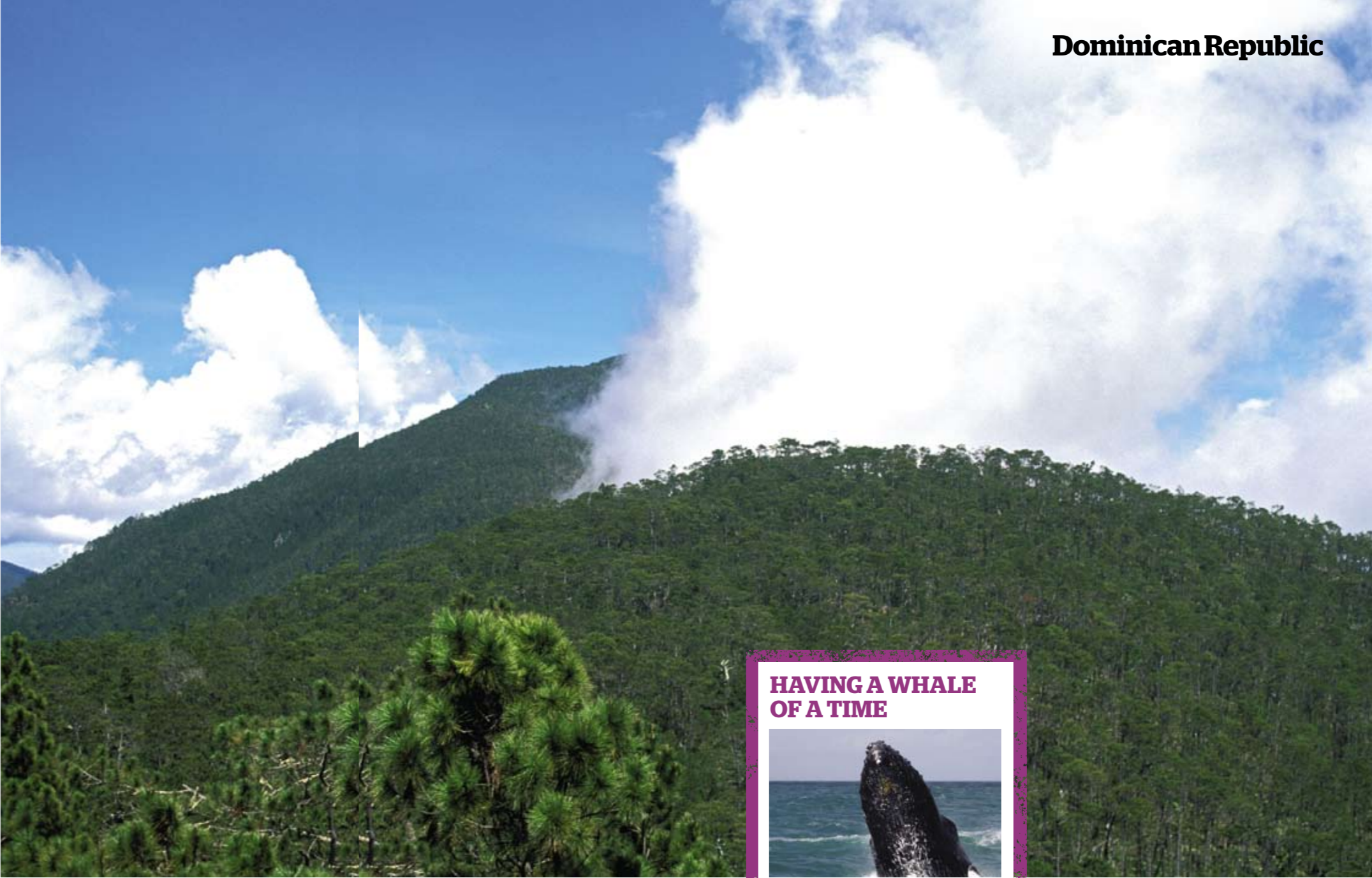
LOCAL VIEW
Melvin Marte, artisan, 33, La Vega
“We have 14 different mask workshops in town – we work between May and February. La Vega is one of the best street Carnivals in the world.”

a boat. Oviedo's major draw is the chance to see flamingos flying gracefully across the lagoon in search of sustenance. “Flamingos don't actually start out pink,” Melvin said. “But over time they take on the colour of the food they eat, which includes *camarones* [shrimp]”. Stopping off on one of the islands, a pair of rhinoceros iguanas emerged from among the cacti on cue, lazily chewing on leaves and seemingly unaware of our presence.

Keep on trekkin'

For all the laidback boat safaris and beach time, there's also some serious trekking to be done in the Dominican Republic. Jarabacoa is a Mecca for adventurous types. Anything goes here, from canyoning down waterfalls and white water rafting on the nearby Yaque del Norte river to paragliding. But my aim was firmly fixed on conquering Pico Duarte, about 20km west, the tallest of the Caribbean's mountains, towering over 3,000m above sea level.

With local mountain expert Danny by my side, I left my hotel in Jarabacoa before sunrise and jumped on the back of a truck for the 40-minute drive to La Ciénaga de Manabao, the best place to start the ascent. The trip to the peak is some 46km in two days and you need a modicum of fitness to do it. Salvage, however, comes in a back-up convoy of supplies on mules (in my case marshalled by the ever-smiling Roselio), meaning that you can hop on



and enjoy the easy life if needed. My pride, though, was at stake.

There's no doubt that the trek is hard work on the ascent, a steady climb with occasional flatter sections. But it's a challenge tempered by dazzling scenery, starting with flat woodland flanked by *tayota* plants – a squash with pear-shaped fruit – and evolving into a mixture of luscious undergrowth, vast pine woods and grasslands.

The advantage of walking in winter (December to March) is the cooler temperatures that make the trek less arduous. The path, though, can often be muddy – a mixture of rains and constant tread – which is all part of the adventure. Danny, an old hand, paced his way onwards and upwards as I lagged behind. A few hours in and my trousers and hiking boots were covered in a healthy coat of Dominica's finest mud; Danny, meanwhile, was carefully picking out the tiniest traces from the soles of his trainers.

A peak to reach

The original plan was to walk to base camp La Compartición – where there are basic cooking facilities and wooden huts to sleep – about 5km from the top. Normally you get up at about four in the morning the next day to complete the final hurdle for sunrise, then spend the rest of the day descending. We arrived early on the first day and decide to plough on. With energy levels momentarily flagging, I resorted to the mule for a few kilometres before will-power (and damaged pride) got me to the top on foot.

At the peak a Dominican flag and a bust of Juan Pablo Duarte, the country's founding father, awaited me. It was an eerie experience being so high, watching the wind whip puffy clouds across the sky, before we made our way back to the camp as dusk sets in. The evening was spent around a campfire, resting tired limbs and marvelling at the brightness of the moon, before collapsing into bed by

HAVING A WHALE OF A TIME



◉ If you're visiting between January and March, a trip to the Samaná peninsula in the northeast (easily accessible via one of the country's newer roads from Santo Domingo) is a must. Humpback whales return to these warmer waters every winter to breed, meaning a chance to see them up close is virtually guaranteed. Boat trips get pretty full with tourists but try the **Whale Samaná**, a three/four-hour trip run by American Kim Beddall (see footnotes for details). Kim's an expert who has been visiting the area since 1984 and the on-board, multilingual staff are marine biologists. A highly educational tour (with incredible stats, eg: baby humpbacks drinking 200 litres of milk a day), on my visit I saw a whale 'breaching' (jumping completely out of the water) from a distance – often to get rid of the tonne of parasites they carry. I also saw a mother and baby playing in the water, the latter smacking its fin down on the water as it came up to breath. It's also worth a stop-off in nearby Sánchez for a slice of fisherman life.

9pm. The next morning I wolfed down what was probably the heartiest breakfast of my life – pork with boiled potatoes and plantain, alongside strong coffee, cooked up by Roselio – before beginning the descent.

As I trekked back to civilisation I mulled over which of my many Dominican experiences had left the biggest impression: the mountains, the coastline, the history, the food, the people, the non-stop music or the rum. In truth, it proved impossible to distil everything I'd seen and heard into one moment. But on a cold winter's day, when it's dark and miserable outside, I know I'll be pining for just one more plunge into those turquoise waters or another chance to see the sunrise at altitude. And who knows, maybe next time I'll be brave enough to try the whitewater rafting. ■

Ed Stocker is a freelance travel writer and photographer who's written for *The Independent*, *The Sunday Times*, *BBC* and *New Statesman*



Dominican Republic

Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Santo Domingo
Population: 10 million
Language: Spanish
Time: GMT -4 (all year)
International dialing code: +1809
Visa: None required by UK nationals. You need to fill out a tourist card on arrival at the airport and pay US\$10.
Money: Dominican peso (RD\$), currently around RD\$61 to the UK£. US dollars accepted at some hotels and excursions.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

This being the Caribbean, temperatures are warm year-round. Mountainous places such as Jarabacoa and Constanza are considerably fresher than the rest of the country.

■ The winter is the cooler time to visit but good for trekking; expect mid to high 20s with cool nights. Jan to March is best for whalewatching.

■ Best to spot wildlife at Lago Enriquillo and the Laguna de Oviedo (feeding season), with large groups of flamingos visible.

■ Active hurricane period for the Caribbean.

■ Active hurricane period for the Atlantic.

Health & safety

There are no special requirements for the Dominican Republic; no vaccine certificates are needed. Malaria is present but not a high risk (apart from along the border with Haiti).

Further reading & information

Dominican Republic (Rough Guides, 2011)
The Feast of the Goat by Mario Vargas Llosa (Faber & Faber, 2003): Nobel prize-winner's generation-spanning novel
www.lata.org
 Latin American Travel Association
www.godominicanrepublic.com
 The tourist board

More online

Visit **www.wanderlust.co.uk/130** for links to more content:

Archive articles

Trip Planner: Alternative Caribbean
 - issue 106, Oct 09

Planning guides

Dominican Republic travel guide

The trip

The author was hosted by the **Dominican Republic Tourist Board** (www.godominicanrepublic.com) on a self-drive itinerary. Book ahead for Cachote eco-lodge through coordinator Martiano Matos (ecoturismocomunitariocachote@yahoo.com). Prices for couples are RD\$2,500 pp for two nights, including accommodation, food and a cloud forest trek.

Rancho Baiguete in Jarabacoa is a one-stop shop for adventure activities (from US\$255 pp) and horses. In Constanza, **Safari Constanza** can take you trekking and to see the Aguas Blanca waterfall (safari. constanza@hotmail.com). **Whale Samaná** excursion: US\$50 pp, plus US\$3 sanctuary entrance fee (kim@whalesamana.com).

Getting there

BA flies to Santo Domingo or Punta Cana from Gatwick (from £580; www.ba.co.uk); **Thomson** flies from Manchester and Gatwick to Punta Cana and Puerto Plata (from £450; www.thomson.co.uk). Flight time is around 10 hours.

Getting around

A list of car rental companies can be found at www.andri.com.do. You'll need a sense of adventure if heading to the southwest. A 4WD with GPS is best if exploring (road signs are infrequent). Caribe Tours operates an extensive bus network. A one-way trip from Santo Domingo to Samaná costs RD\$320 (www.caribetours.com).

No-frills buses travel set urban routes (known as *guaguas*; no more than RD\$25) as do similar *concho* cars. There are also *motoconchos* (motorbike taxi; no more than RD\$100 for a longer trip).

Cost of travel

The DR is **inexpensive away from the resorts**. A mid-range hotel costs around US\$25-35 a day. Expect to pay around RD\$100 for a sandwich and around RD\$300 for fresh fish and *tostones* on the coast.

Accommodation

In Santo Domingo, **Hotel Doña Elvira** (www.dona-elvira.com) is a prettily restored colonial building in the historic centre with an internal courtyard (doubles from US\$79).



Highlights

Santo Domingo The capital's historic centre is a charming time warp.

Cachote A cool retreat up in the mountains with a beautiful cloud forest.

Bahía de las Águilas Simply the most stunning beach in the country.

Laguna de Oviedo A vast saltwater lagoon ideal for wildlife spotting.

Constanza A great area for trekking and outdoor pursuits.

Jarabacoa The adventure capital of the DR and a springboard for Pico Duarte.

La Vega The best place to catch the colourful Carnival (Sundays in Feb).

Punta Rucia A laidback beach town that has purposely avoided development.

Samaná Spot humpback whales returning from northern climes to give birth.

Playa Rincón Giving Bahía de las Águilas a run for its money.

In Pedernales, **Doña Chava** is a rustic-style family-run hotel that does a great breakfast (www.donachava.com; doubles from RD\$900). Jarabacoa's **Rancho Baiguete** (www.ranchobaiguete.com) is an all-inclusive ranch catering to the booming adventure market (doubles from US\$47 pp; including meals).

Food & drink

Comida criolla (traditional Dominican food) is delicious. On the coast you'll have a choice of fish – grilled, steamed or deep-fried; rice, avocado and plantain are standard sides. Try *mangú* (mashed plantain with onions and salami) for breakfast – an energy boost for a day of outdoor activities. ■