

The Interior



Even the most diehard beach fan will eventually tire of sun and sand, and when you do, the cool mountainous playground of the interior is the place to come. Here you'll find the popular mountain retreats of Jarabacoa and Constanza – places where you might actually want a sweater – plus roaring rivers, soaring misty mountains and the only white-water rafting in the Caribbean. Below, on the plains, in the Valle del Cibao, is where merengue spontaneously erupted onto the musical landscape, and where you'll find some of the best Carnival celebrations in the country.

Jarabacoa (500m) is the Cabarete of the interior – a tourist town, and the center of a booming adventure-tour trade. Here you can go white-water rafting, visit waterfalls on horseback, and still party till the sun comes up, if you've a mind to do so. Even higher up is the less visited settlement of Constanza (1200m), a town unique in the Caribbean. Where else can you sit at dusk, huddled up in a sweater, watching the mist descend down into the valley as the sun sets behind the mountains?

Economic life in the interior revolves around Santiago, the DR's second-largest city. It is the capital of a vast tobacco- and sugarcane-growing region. No wonder, then, that the majority of the country's cigars – among the world's best – are processed and manufactured here. The Valle del Cibao, in which Santiago sits, is justly famous for its Carnival celebrations, the top bash in the country. Little La Vega frequently outdoes big city Santiago for both the scale and lavishness of the party – in particular, the ornate, handmade masks worn by participants.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Go **white-water rafting** (p213) on the Caribbean's only raftable river, the turbulent Río Yaque del Norte near Jarabacoa
- Party hearty with the locals in little La Vega in February, when it throws the country's biggest **Carnival celebrations** (p223)
- Light up a stogie and sample the local merchandise in **Santiago** (p207), capital of the cigar trade
- Watch the sunset as the mist descends into the valley in high-altitude **Constanza** (p220)
- Linger at the top of **Pico Duarte** (p217), taking in the views of the Atlantic and the Caribbean



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Santiago's **Aeropuerto Internacional Cibao** (☎ 809-233-8000; www.aeropuertocibao.com.do) is the third-largest airport in the country, and offers frequent international air service to major destinations. There's a good selection of rent-a-car agencies at the airport, too.

Santiago sits on the main trunk highway that runs from Santo Domingo north to Puerto Plata, and has plenty of efficient bus service to all points of the compass. There's regular, first-class bus service to all destinations listed in this chapter, except for Constanza – you'll need to hop a *gua-gua* (local bus) to get up into the mountains.

As always, renting a car, preferably an SUV, will give you more freedom to explore the countryside.

SANTIAGO

pop 623,000

The second largest of the three city-states from which the DR was formed, Santiago maintains a distinct cultural flair that makes it not only uniquely Dominican, but also uniquely, err, Santiagan. The racial mix is noticeably different; fashions in clothing, facial hair and public transportation differ markedly from the rest of the country; and the citizens have a peculiar fetish for Confederate-style gazebos.

Santiago is often overlooked and even put down by travelers as a destination. This is largely unfair. It is a pleasant, livable city, with good restaurants and bars, a pleasant park, one of the country's six *beisbol* (baseball) teams, and best of all, few tourists, making this a good place to get to know the Dominican way of life.

The city is the capital of a large tobacco and sugarcane-growing region. The plantations send their raw material to Santiago, where the majority of the country's rum and cigars are produced – Santiago is a must for cigar aficionados.

All buses from Santo Domingo to the north coast pass through Santiago. Consider getting off and staying for a day or two. There are some good hotels, a couple of interesting museums, and come Carnival time you'll be able to experience firsthand the region's tradition of ornate handmade masks.

HISTORY

Santiago was founded in 1495 by Christopher Columbus' elder brother, Bartholomew. However, the earthquake of 1562 caused so much damage to the city that it was rebuilt on its present site beside the Río Yaque del Norte. It was attacked and destroyed several times by invading French troops, as part of long-simmering tension between Spain and France over control of the island. Santiago also suffered terribly during the DR's 1912 civil war.

The years immediately following the civil war were some of the city's best. WWI caused worldwide shortages of raw tropical materials, so prices soared for products such as sugar, tobacco, cocoa and coffee – all of which were being grown around Santiago. From 1914 through the end of the war and into the 1920s, Santiago's economy boomed. Lovely homes and impressive stores, electric lighting and paved streets appeared throughout town. In May 1922, Hwy Duarte opened, linking Santiago with Bonaio, La Vega and Santo Domingo.

Today, Santiago still relies on agriculture as its chief source of revenue, and is a noticeably wealthier city than most of the country.

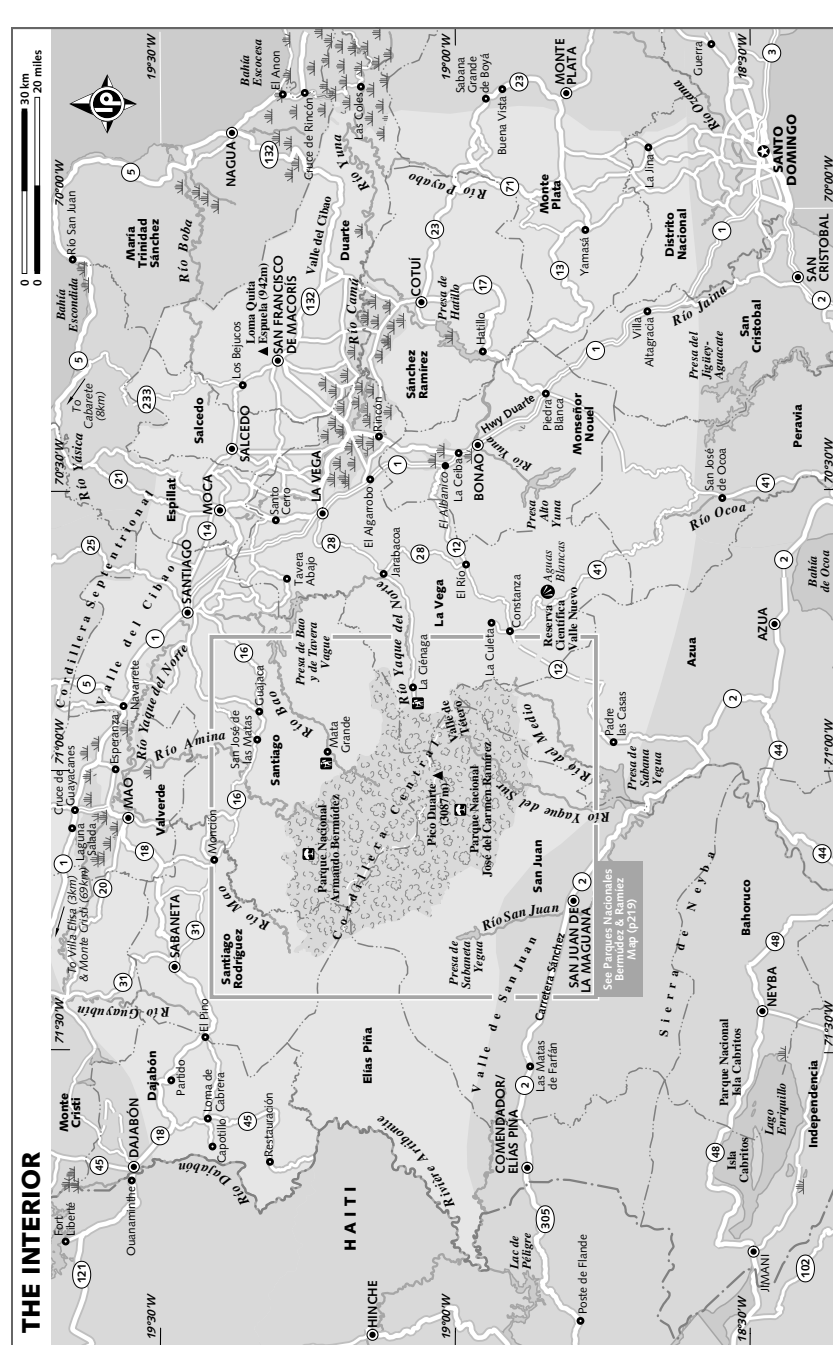
ORIENTATION

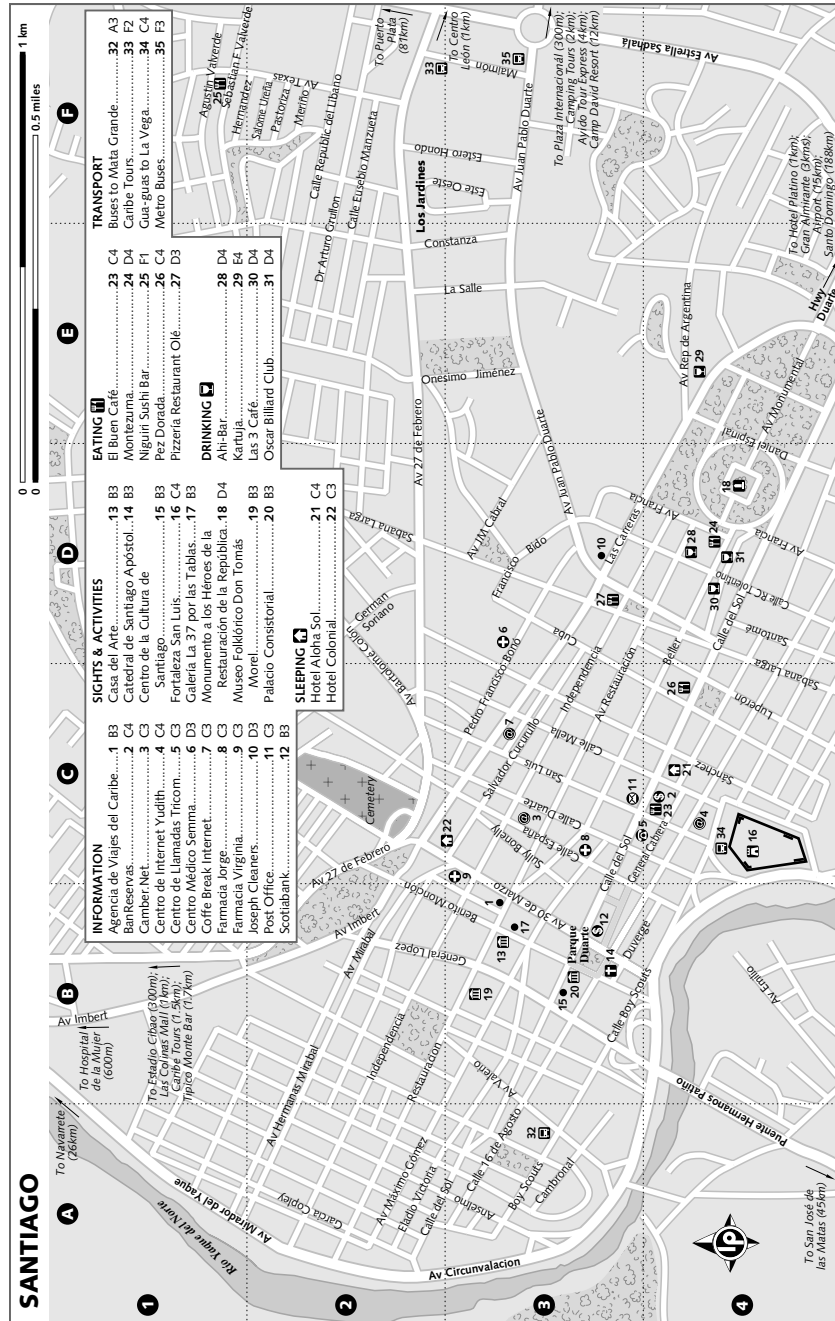
The center of town is Parque Duarte, a busy, leafy park with a gazebo, the cathedral to its south side and Palacio Consistorial to its west. (A number of homeless people hang out here – expect to be aggressively panhandled if you sit down.) The park is at the corner of Av 30 de Marzo and Calle del Sol, both large commercial avenues with ATMs, hotels and assorted shops nearby. Av 30 de Marzo runs south to the Río Yaque del Norte and north to Av Las Carreras and Av 27 de Febrero, the main roads in and out of town.

Calle del Sol runs east to the Monument and the bar scene nearby – you can also take Av Restauración, two blocks north.

INFORMATION

Internet Access
Camber.Net (☎ 809-471-3917; Calle España 41; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat) Doubles as a call center.
Centro de Internet Yudith (☎ 809-581-4882; Calle 16 de Agosto near Mella; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8:30am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat)
Coffe Break Internet (☎ 809-724-1389; Cucurullo 61; per hr US\$0.80) Has CD/DVD burners.





INFORMATION	
Agencia de Viajes del Caribe.....	1 B3
BanReservas.....	2 C4
Cambier Net.....	3 C3
Centro de Internet Yudith.....	4 C4
Centro de Llamadas Tricom.....	5 D3
Centro Médico Semma.....	6 D3
Coffe Break Internet.....	7 C3
Farmacia Jorge.....	8 C3
Joseph Virginea.....	9 D3
Post Office.....	11 C3
Scotiabank.....	12 B3
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Casa del Arte.....	13 B3
Catedral de Santiago Apóstol.....	14 B3
Centro de la Cultura de Santiago.....	15 B3
Fortaleza San Luis.....	16 C4
Galería La 37 por las Tablas.....	17 B3
Monumento a los Héroes de la Restauración de la República.....	18 D4
Museo Folklórico Don Tomás Morel.....	19 B3
Palacio Consistorial.....	20 B3
SLEEPING	
Hotel Aloha Sol.....	21 C4
Hotel Colonial.....	22 C3
EATING	
El Buen Café.....	23 C4
Montezuma.....	24 D4
Niguri Sushi Bar.....	25 F1
Pez Dorada.....	26 C4
Pizzeria Restaurant Ole.....	27 D3
DRINKING	
Ahi-Bar.....	28 D4
Kartuja.....	29 E4
Las 3 Café.....	30 D4
Oscar Billiard Club.....	31 D4
TRANSPORT	
Buses to Mata Grande.....	32 A3
Caribe Tours.....	33 F2
Guaguas to la Vega.....	34 C4
Metro Buses.....	35 F3

Laundry

Joseph Cleaners (☎ 809-583-4880; Las Carreras near Duarte; ☎ 7am-7:30pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) US\$1 per load (up to 9kg) and US\$3 per load/half-hour to dry. Same-day service if you drop off early.

Medical Services

Centro Médico Semma (☎ 809-226-1053; Pedro Francisco Bonó btwn Sánchez & Cuba; ☎ 24hr) Free for local teachers and their families, this well-regarded hospital treats other patients at reasonable rates.

Farmacia Jorge (☎ 809-582-2887; cnr Calle España & Av Gómez)

Farmacia Virginia (☎ 809-582-4142; Av 30 de Marzo 48) Will deliver.

Hospital de la Mujer (☎ 809-575-8963; Av Imbert; ☎ 24hr) Specializes in women's care, but has a fully equipped emergency room.

Money

BanReservas (Calle del Sol 66)

Scotiabank (cnr Calle del Sol & 30 de Marzo)

Post

Post office (cnr Calle del Sol & San Luis) Three blocks east of Parque Duarte.

Travel Agencies

Agencia de Viajes del Caribe (☎ 809-241-1368; Av Restauración 123) Small, conveniently located agency that issues domestic and international air tickets and can book package tours in the area.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Centro León

The **Centro León** (☎ 809-582-2315; www.centroleon.org.do; Av 27 de Febrero 146, Villa Progreso; admission US\$2.25, free Tue; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun, closed Mon) is a sprawling monument to the wealth of the León Jimenez empire, and has surprisingly little to offer the tourist. There are three **exhibition rooms** in the main building, and the emphasis here is on all things Dominican. One exhibition focuses on the local ecosystem, history and population; another displays contemporary Dominican art and photography; and the third (closed when we were there) houses temporary exhibits. A separate building houses a self-aggrandizing exhibit on the history of the Jimenez family, its beginnings in the tobacco industry, its break into the beer market, and its success in the banking world. For such a grand edifice it's all surprisingly mundane, and even the most tweedy of visitors will see everything in an hour or so.

Of moderately more interest is the working **cigar factory** on site, where you can watch a dozen cigar rollers making Aurora Preferidos, its premium brand. The adjoining cigar shop sells the complete range of smokes, including the Preferidos (a box of 25 costs US\$420).

Guided tours are available in Spanish (per person US\$4), English, French and German (per person US\$5.50) and last about 1½ hours. Reservations are required three days in advance for tours. A taxi here will cost you US\$3, or pick up a Ruta A *concho* (private car that follows a set route; US\$0.39) along Calle del Sol – not all Ruta A *conchos* go as far as the Centro León, though, so be sure to ask.

A small **gift shop** sells books on Dominican history, art, culture and food, and there's a small cafeteria if you get the munchies. During the evenings, philistine insomniacs will find their cure – the center offers an ever-changing schedule of art appreciation classes, art-house cinema and sometimes live musical events.

Museo Folklórico Don Tomás Morel

Renowned poet and cultural critic Tomás Morel founded this eclectic, eccentric **folk art museum** (☎ 809-582-6787; Av Restauración 174; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 3:30-6pm Mon-Fri) in 1962, and helped operate it until his death in 1992. Considered by many to be the father of Santiago's modern Carnival, Morel was a tireless promoter and chronicler of the yearly celebration. He was especially fond of the distinctive *caretas* (masks), and since its founding the museum has displayed the best masks for visitors to enjoy. There's also information on the history of merengue, some Taíno artifacts, and with at least a week's notice you can organize mask-making classes (US\$150 per group) at Carnival time, and dance classes (US\$50 per group for two hours) the rest of the year. The brightly colored building is impossible to miss, and even those who may be dreading another museum will get a spark of astonishment out of this place.

Casa del Arte

Those interested in contemporary Dominican painting, photography and sculpture will find this small **gallery** (☎ 809-471-7839; Benito Monción 46; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) worth a visit. Some nights of the week a film club meets to screen good-quality Hollywood flicks (free

WHEN A CIGAR IS JUST A CIGAR

Despite the virulent antismoking campaigns faddish these days, a good cigar remains one of life's finest pleasures, and the DR – one of the world's largest producers of cigars – is the ideal place to sample a few.

Many of the world's top brands are made here – Aurora, Montecristo, Arturo Fuente, to name a few – but there are real bargains to be had on world-class cigars if you know where to look. Many of those name brands contract the work to local, Dominican cigar-makers, who then offer the 'label-less' cigar to locals and travelers at half the price.

It's critical when buying cigars to test whether they've been made well and stored properly. Pick up the cigar: it should have a springy tightness, indicating solid construction. If it's too soft or too hard it won't draw well. It shouldn't crackle under your fingers, either; that means it's too dry, and will smoke like kindling.

Look for dedicated cigar stores – don't buy from random vendors on the beach or on the street. The most important advice, though, is to always try the cigar before you splurge on a whole box. If they won't let you do that, go somewhere else.

admission), there's sometimes live music (US\$10) and on Saturdays live theater (US\$3 to US\$5). Pass by for a copy of the gallery's latest monthly event calendar.

Galería LA 37 por las Tablas

Across the street from the Casa del Arte, **La 37** (☎ 809-587-3033; 37porlastablas.blogspot.com; Benito Monción 37; admission varies; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) also hosts local art shows in its foyer, and has an outdoor stage for live music, dance and theater performances, both amateur and professional.

Centro de la Cultura de Santiago

Though not much to look at from the outside, the **Centro de la Cultura de Santiago** (☎ 809-226-5222; Calle del Sol; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat), a half-block from Parque Duarte, offers a regular program of musical and theatrical performances, including plays, choral singing, children's theater and holiday concerts. There's also a rotating exhibition of Dominican painting in the small gallery. Pass by for a copy of the monthly schedule.

Catedral de Santiago Apóstol

Santiago's **cathedral** (cnr Calles 16 de Agosto & Benito Monción; ☎ 7-9am Mon-Sat, to 8pm Sun), opposite the south side of Parque Duarte, was built between 1868 and 1895 and is a combination of Gothic and neoclassical styles. The cathedral contains the marble tomb of the late-19th-century dictator Ulises Heureaux, an elaborately carved mahogany altar and impressive stained-glass windows by contemporary Dominican artist Dincón Mora.

Palacio Consistorial

On the west side of Parque Duarte you'll find the former town hall, which now includes a small **museum** (Parque Duarte; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon and 2-5pm Mon-Sat) devoted to the city's colorful history. If you're here during Carnival, don't miss the huge and stunning display of masks and *fichas* (posters), part of a yearly competition that draws entries from the top artists and mask-makers in Santiago and from across the country.

Monumento a los Héroeos de la Restauración de la República

On a hill at the east end of the downtown area is Santiago's most visible and recognizable sight, the **Monument to the Heroes of the Restoration of the Republic** (Av Monumental; admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$1/\$2, Tue free; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun). Standing on the steps of the Monument, you begin to understand what it means to be Dominican – that final war against Spain, a war for identity, is commemorated here (for more history, see p46). Completely renovated and reopened in 2007, the site now boasts life-sized museum exhibits of Dominican history, and on Tuesdays you'll be joined by large groups of uniformed primary-schoolers being walked through the past. There are great views from the top of the eight-story base, but the spire has been permanently closed due to safety concerns. Large bronze statues of the celebrated generals gaze down upon Santiago from the steps, and in a corner of the grounds you'll find a bronze 'hall of fame' of former Águilas *beísbol* players (the local team).

Beísbol

Santiago's Águilas baseball team is one of the six baseball teams in the country, and watching the local fans root for the home side is almost as fun as the game itself. Games are played at **Estadio Cibao** (☎ 809-575-1810; Av Imlbert), northwest of the city center; they're held two to three times a week in winter, and tickets cost US\$8. It's wise to book in advance – stadium capacity is a mere 18,000 people, and the Águilas are the winning-est team in the league's history, making them very popular indeed. To get there, hop any Ruta A *concho* westbound on Calle del Sol.

Fortaleza San Luis

Built in the late 17th century, the **Fortaleza San Luis** (cnr Calle Boy Scouts & San Luis; admission free) operated as a military stronghold until the 1970s, when it was converted into a prison. Today it houses a small museum, with a strong emphasis on Dominican military history – ancient rusty weapons, a collection of 20th-century tanks and artillery, even three vials of sand from Iraq. There's a small collection of Taíno pottery, some paintings, and outdoors, in the middle of the fort, there are a few pleasant shady benches where you can sit and ponder the many busts of bygone Dominican generals.

TOURS

Camping Tours (☎ 809-583-3121; www.campingtours.net; Calle Two 2, Villa Olga) offers the cheapest trek to Pico Duarte. Expect Spanish-speaking guides and groups of 20 to 25 people. Prices per person are US\$220 on foot, US\$270 with a shared mule and US\$320 for your own mule. (Go for the mule.)

CARNIVAL IN SANTIAGO

Held in February, Carnival is big all over the country, but is especially so in Santiago. The city is famous for its incredibly artistic and fantastical *caretas* (masks) and hosts an annual international *careta* competition leading up to Carnival.

The Carnival parade here is made up of rival neighborhoods: La Joya and Los Pepines. Onlookers watch from overpasses, apartment buildings, even the tops of lampposts. Costumes focus on two images: the *lechón* (piglet), which represents the devil, and the *pepín*, a fantastical animal that appears to be a cross between a cow and a duck. The most obvious difference between the two is that *lechón* masks have two smooth horns and those of the *pepines* have horns with dozens of tiny papier-mâché spikes. All participants swing *vejigas* (inflated cow bladders) and hit each other – and onlookers – on the behind.

If you decide to come to Santiago for Carnival, be sure to make reservations – rooms fill up fast this time of the year.

SLEEPING

Hotel Colonial (☎ 809-247-3122; colonialdeluxe@yahoo.com; Salvador Cucurullo 113-115; s/d with fan US\$12/19, with air-con US\$16/27; ☎) The Colonial has the most budget rooms in the center. The rooms are clean (the smell of disinfectant lingers in the military-barracks-style hallways); there's cable TV; and some rooms have fridges. The rooms in the hotel's **Colonial Deluxe** building next door are nicer, although the name might be a stretch.

Hotel Platino (☎ 809-724-7576; www.hotelplatinord.com.do; Av Estrella Sadhalá; s US\$33-73, d US\$61-106, ste US\$97-124; ☎ ☎ ☎) Set at the back of the Plaza Platinum shopping center a short ways out of town, this is the best-value midrange option in Santiago. The 92 rooms all have wired internet, reliable hot water, TVs and air-con, and rooms on the executive floor have wi-fi and plasma TVs. There's a small business center, a bar and restaurant, and plenty of parking. Avoid the basement standard rooms – they're a bit claustrophobic.

ourpick Camp David (☎ 809-276-6400; www.campdavidranch.com; Carretera Luperón Km 71/2; s/d US\$40/45; ☎ ☎ ☎) Set on a mountain ridge about 30 minutes outside Santiago, at 923m Camp David offers sweeping vistas out over the city and the valley below. It was founded by an admirer of Rafael Trujillo; the lobby holds three of the former dictator's vintage cars. To say the rooms are spacious is an understatement – the bathrooms are as big as some hotel rooms – rooms 5, 6 and 7 in particular are enormous. As it's set several kilometers off the main road, you'll need your own car to get here (or helicopter – it has its own heliport), or take a taxi (US\$10).

Hotel Aloha Sol (☎ 809-583-0090; www.alohasol.com; Calle del Sol 50; s US\$56-70, d US\$65-85 incl breakfast,

ste US\$155; **P** **☎** **☎** **☎**) This centrally located hotel is your best midrange option if you want to be within walking distance of almost everything. The rooms themselves are a bit past their due date, and many of the cheaper rooms lack exterior windows – and the air freshener they use here can be overpowering. Avoid the uninspired hotel restaurant, although the breakfast is good.

Gran Almirante (**☎** 809-580-1992; www.hodelpa.com; Av Estrella Sadhalá; r/ste US\$205/285; **P** **☎** **☎** **☎**) The only five-star hotel in town, the Grand Admiral – a reference to Columbus – is the obvious choice for business travelers on an expense account. The rooms are top-notch, there's a variety of restaurants and bars, and the on-site casino will keep you bleary-eyed till late.

EATING

El Buen Café (**☎** 809-582-6755; cnr San Luis & Calle del Sol; mains US\$3-7; **☎** breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Dominican-style cafeteria has a menu, but ignore it – come for lunch and get a good set meal for US\$3. It also delivers – the sandwiches, fried chicken and burritos are all good value (if not, perhaps, the height of culinary perfection).

Pizzería Restaurant Olé (**☎** 809-582-0866; cnr Av Duarte & Independencia; mains US\$7-14; **☎** breakfast, lunch & dinner) Dominican pizza is served with ketchup (pronounced ka-*choo*). Why? Coz there's no pizza sauce under the cheese. An oddly satisfying experience, and at the Olé you can squirt the red stuff to your heart's content, on, say, a medium pizza (US\$10) that's big enough for two.

Niguirí Sushi Bar (**☎** 809-581-1212; Calle Sebastian F Valverde 31; mains US\$8-15; **☎** lunch & dinner) Well, we're pretty sure this ain't how they do it in Tokyo, but if you've been without for a while, the Niguirí really hits the sushi spot. It plays groovy electronic music, and on Wednesdays some dishes are two-for-one. Niguirí is set amid a small cluster of restaurants in a quiet residential neighborhood – look for the sail-canopy roof of the restaurant next door.

Montezuma (**☎** 809-581-1111; cnr Av Francia & Beller; mains US\$8-18; **☎** 11am-2am) Facing the Monument, this popular restaurant specializes in Mexican dishes, from tacos and burritos to filet of grouper grilled with chili and garlic. Prices are a bit high for the main dishes, but the smaller orders are reasonable and the restaurant itself – spread over three levels with

patio seating, long bar tables and rusted steel stools – is worth a look. There's live mariachi music every Friday starting at 10pm.

our pick **Camp David** (**☎** 809-276-6400; www.campdavidranch.com; Carretera Luperón Km 71/2; mains US\$10-18; **☎** breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sitting outside on the restaurant balcony, piano music on the stereo and the city spread out at your feet, there's only one thing to do: propose to your girlfriend (or to the waiter, who'll do in a pinch if you're single). This is easily the most romantic spot in town, and has service worthy of a resort called Camp David. Beef is the specialty here – go for the *filete generalissimo*, 8oz of Angus beef (US\$15). Good wine list.

Pez Dorada (**☎** 809-582-4051; Calle del Sol 43; mains US\$15-40; **☎** 11:30am-11:45pm) This flashback to the '70s offers unrepentantly good, expensive food. There aren't too many restaurants left that still advertise 'London broil' (US\$16) with pride. It also does a rabbit stroganoff (US\$19) and lobster thermidor (US\$38). The Chinese owners offer a small list of Chinese dishes.

DRINKING

Clustered around the Monument are a dozen or so bars, restaurants and late-night eateries (and one pool hall), making this Santiago's best place for bar-hopping, people-meeting and general revelry. When the bars close, head to the Monument, where vendors sell beer from coolers and locals blast music from their car stereos till dawn. Whenever you decide to stumble home, remember to take a cab – while not especially dangerous, the center can be dodgy in the wee hours.

Ahi-Bar (**☎** 809-581-6779; www.ahi-bar.com; cnr Calle RC Tolentino & Av Restauración; **☎** 4pm-late) This is the biggest of a string of bars on Calle Tolentino, with a large patio set above street level featuring high bar tables and stools. Most people come to drink, but in case you missed dinner the food here is actually pretty good. There's live outdoor jazz on Mondays.

Kartuja (**☎** 809-581-3107; Hotel & Casino Matum, Av Las Carreras 1; **☎** 8pm to very late) Set in the Matum casino, this place doesn't get thumping until 2am or 3am – as part of the casino, it is exempt from ever-changing local licensing laws. The bouncers and bar staff all inexplicably wear monk costumes, but the place has air-con – one of the very few clubs in the country that does.

our pick **Las 3 Café** (**☎** 809-276-5909; Calle RC Tolentino 38; **☎** 5pm-late) If a quiet drink with friends is

what you're after, this is the place to go. The music is kept to a dull roar – although there's still enough space to dance merengue or *bachata* (popular guitar music based on bolero rhythms) – and the friendly owner will welcome you with a handshake and a smile. If you get peckish, the kitchen can set you up with *picaderas* – literally 'munchies' – a sampling of meats, cheeses and olives, perfect for sharing.

Oscar Billiard Club (**☎** 809-241-4730; Beller btwn Calle RC Tolentino & Av Francia; tables per hr US\$2; **☎** 2pm-4am) This club has 18 pool tables scattered through a large room with a bar fronting onto the street. The music is insanely loud – possibly the loudest on the street – so bring earplugs.

Tipico Monte Bar (**☎** 809-575-0300; Av 27 de Febrero 18; www.tipicomontebars.com; admission varies; **☎** 5pm-late, closed Tue) For a taste of real merengue music and dancing, the Monte Bar is a must. There's frequent live music, and you'll spot some of the best merengue dancers in town. It even webcasts its musical events live on its website. As it's set amid a series of auto-repair shops in the Las Colinas neighborhood north of the city, you'll want a cab there and back (US\$3 one way).

SHOPPING

Santiago has two large shopping malls.

Las Colinas Mall (Av 27 de Febrero; **☎** 8am-11pm) Anchored by the aptly named Supermercado Jumbo, one of the biggest supermarkets in Santiago. The **movie theater** (**☎** 7pm-late Mon-Fri, 4pm-late Sat & Sun) has eight screens and shows the latest flicks for only US\$3, the cheapest in town. The Ruta A *concho* passes right out front.

Plaza Internacional (Av Duarte; **☎** 8am-11pm) This decidedly more upscale shopping center, just a few kilometers east of the Monument, has a good food court, an excellent bookstore (very few English titles, unfortunately) and a movie theater. The Ruta A *concho* passes right out front.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Santiago's **Aeropuerto Internacional Cibao** (**☎** 809-233-8000; www.aerpuertocibao.com.do) is a 20-minute drive from the center. It is serviced by the following airlines:

Air Turks and Caicos (**☎** 809-233-8262; www.airturksandcaicos.com)

American (**☎** 809-200-5151; www.aa.com)

Continental (**☎** 809-200-1062; www.continental.com)

Delta (**☎** 809-200-9191; www.delta.com)

Jet Blue (**☎** 809-200-9898; www.jetblue.com)

There are no buses or *gua-guas* convenient to the airport, so taxis are your only option (US\$18 one way).

BUS

Caribe Tours (**☎** 809-576-0790) has two terminals in Santiago: in Las Colinas on Av 27 de Febrero about 3km north of the center, and in Los Jardines, just steps from the competing Metro Buses terminal. All buses stop at both stations. Destinations include Santo Domingo (US\$6.70, 2½ hours, 26 times daily from 6am to 8:15pm); Puerto Plata (US\$2.75, 1¼ hours, hourly from 8:30am to 9:30pm); Monte Cristi (US\$3.65, 1¼ hours, six departures from 9am to 6:15pm); La Vega (US\$1.80, 45 minutes; take Santo Domingo bus); Dajabón (US\$3.95, 2½ hours; take Monte Cristi bus); and Sosúa (US\$3.05, two hours; take Puerto Plata bus).

Metro Buses (**☎** 809-587-3837; cnr Av Duarte & Maimón) is located east of the center in the Los Jardines neighborhood. Buses to Santo Domingo (US\$7, two hours, hourly from 6am to 7:45pm) leave from here, with a reduced schedule on Sundays. Buses to Puerto Plata (US\$2.75, 1¼ hours) leave at 9am, 11am, 1pm, 4pm, 6pm and 9pm.

All three terminals are on or near the Ruta A *concho* line (US\$0.39), or take a taxi (US\$).

Ayido Tour Express (**☎** 809-556-3082; Isla Instituto, Genaro Pérez) was launching a service to Cap-Haïtien in Haiti when we were there – worth checking out if you're headed that way.

CAR

The airport has a good selection of reliable international rent-a-car companies, all open from 7am to 11pm.

Alamo (**☎** 809-612-3602; www.alamo.com)

Avis (**☎** 809-582-7007; www.avis.com)

Dollar (**☎** 809-233-8108; www.dollar.com)

National (**☎** 809-233-8158; www.nationalcar.com)

Alamo (**☎** 809-583-5543; **☎** 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat, to noon Sun) and **National** (**☎** 809-583-5543; **☎** 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) also both have offices in the Gran Almirante.

GETTING AROUND

Transportation in Santiago, unlike most of the country, is dominated by *conchos* – not

the *motoconchos* (motorcycle taxis) of Puerto Plata, but rather private cars that follow set routes around town, and charge US\$0.39 (up to six passengers per vehicle). *Concho* drivers pay a weekly fee for a permit to slap a letter on their windshield and drive the route. After dark, however, the unlicensed *piratas* take over, and you should exercise caution before hopping into some random person's car.

The motorcycle-shy will be relieved to know that *motoconchos* are almost nonexistent in Santiago, and regular radio taxis ply the streets looking for passengers – the in-town fare when we were there was US\$3.

That said, Santiago remains a fairly walkable city – those pedestrian-inclined will be able to walk to most of the major sites without engaging the services of a fiery four-wheeled beast of doom.

SOUTH OF SANTIAGO

SAN JOSÉ DE LAS MATAS

pop 36,000

This small mountain town is 45km southwest of Santiago, and is a jumping-off point for two major hiking trails in the Parque Nacional Armando Bermúdez. There's not much reason to come here otherwise, but it's a pleasant-enough town – a good place to linger the day before or after a long hike.

If you do happen to be out here for the day, follow the trail that starts behind the post office on Calle 30 de Marzo. It leads to a cliff-top park with great views of the surrounding mountains. It's about an hour return.

Only Camping Tours (p209) offers the trek to Pico Duarte starting from Mata Grande. From there it's a five-day trek to the summit and then down to Valle de Tétero and out at La Ciénega.

For an ATM, try **Asociación Cibao De Ahorros Y Préstamos** (☎ 809-578-8009; Morillo), just a few blocks from the park.

The **Policía Nacional** (☎ 809-578-8278; Calle San José) and the **post office** (Calle 30 de Marzo) are both just a few doors from the park.

Super Farmacia Bisonó (☎ 809-578-8206; Calle 30 de Marzo 38) is just two blocks from the park.

If you need a place to crash before or after a trek, try **Hotel y Restaurant San José** (☎ 809-578-8316; Calle 30 de Marzo; s/d US\$12/21). The hotel also offers the best **restaurant** (mains US\$7-15; ☎ 9am-11pm) in town.

Gua-guas leave opposite the Texaco station at the entrance of town. *Gua-guas* for Santiago (US\$1.75, 45 minutes, from 6:15am to 7pm) leave whenever they fill up. Buses leave roughly every 15 minutes in the mornings, but you may have to wait an hour or more in the middle of the day. There is also a number of taxi stands around town, including **Sajoma Taxi** (☎ 809-578-8778).

Trillo de la Hispaniola

The Hispaniola Trail is reputedly the one used by Columbus to walk from the north coast to the interior. This may or may not be true, but a former environment minister – in a moment of political narcissism – announced the trail with great fanfare but little to no funding. The trail runs from here in Mata Grande to Río Limpio in the west.

The trek takes about eight days, on foot and by mule, and there are no cabins or support of any kind, although you do pass through a number of small villages. The trek should only be attempted in winter, as electrical storms in summer make crossing the high mountains dangerous. No tour companies offer this trip, so you'll need to speak sufficient Spanish to organize a guide and the mules on your own. Expect to pay roughly US\$10 per day for a mule, US\$10 per day for a muleteer, and US\$15 per day for a guide. You'll also be expected to pay for everyone's food.

Few Dominicans, and even fewer foreigners, make this trip. If you do, drop us a line.

JARABACOA

pop 57,000

Nested in the low foothills of the mountains at 500m, Jarabacoa likes to call itself the 'City of Eternal Spring.' This may be an exaggeration – you can still happily tan poolside if you wish – but in the evenings the climate is noticeably cooler. More importantly, Jarabacoa is the outdoor capital of the interior, a place to go white-water rafting, horseback riding or canyoning, and the base most people use to hike to Pico Duarte.

There are some excellent-value hotels in Jarabacoa, and a couple of good restaurants. Those wanting to party hearty can join the locals in the many *colmados* (combination corner store, grocery store and bar) that ring Parque Central, or practice your merengue steps in the handful of nightclubs in town.

Orientation

Av Independencia and Calle Mario N Galán, one block over, are Jarabacoa's main north-south streets – Parque Central is at one end of Av Independencia and the Caribe Tours bus terminal at the other. The city's major east-west street is Calle El Carmen, which borders Parque Central and is the road you take from Jarabacoa to get to Rancho Baiguarte and Constanza.

Information

EMERGENCY

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-754-3216; cnr José Duran & Mario Galán) Located behind the Caribe Tours terminal.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet shops cluster within a block or two of Parque Central.

Centro de Copiado y Papelería (☎ 809-574-2902; cnr Duarte & Av Independencia; per hr US\$1) This busy copy shop also doubles as an internet center.

New York Net Café (Plaza Ramirez; per hr US\$0.75; ☎ 8am-midnight) Best hours and prices in town. Headphones and a fast connection.

MEDICAL SERVICES

The town has two private clinics that offer 24-hour medical services, and a pharmacy that can deliver to your door.

Centro Medico Dr Abad (☎ 809-574-2431; Calle El Carmen 40)

Clínica Dr Terrero (☎ 809-574-4597; Av Independencia 2A)

Farmacia Miguelito (☎ 809-574-2755; Calle Mario N Galán 70) Will deliver.

MONEY

Banco BHD (Galán near Carmen)

Banco Popular (Av Independencia) Near Herrera.

Banco Progreso (Calle Uribe near Av Independencia)

BanReservas (cnr Sánchez & Galán)

POST

Post office (Av Independencia) Located on the northern edge of town.

TELEPHONE

A&G Servicios Multiples (☎ 809-574-4044; genao tours@hotmail.com; Av Independencia 43; ☎ 8am-10pm) This travel agency doubles as a telephone center.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 809-574-7287; securja@hotmail.com; Plaza Ramirez, 2nd fl) On the west side of the central

plaza, a small tourism office (Spanish only) shares basic information about the area's activities; if you're lucky, you may also be able to score a map or two.

Activities

White-water rafting is the star of the show here, followed closely by visiting the three waterfalls nearby. You can also go canyoning, and there are a few short hikes in the area.

WHITE-WATER RAFTING

The Río Yaque del Norte is the longest river in the country, and rafting a portion of it can be a fun day trip. A typical rafting excursion begins with breakfast, followed by a truck-ride upriver to the put-in. You'll be given a life vest, a helmet and a wetsuit (no elbow or knee pads, unfortunately) plus instructions on paddling and safety. Then everyone clambers into the rafts and sets off downriver. You're usually asked to paddle a fair amount of the time, both in the rapids to keep the boat on its proper line, and in the flatwater areas to stay on pace. You'll stop for a small snack about two-thirds of the way downriver, and then return to Jarabacoa for lunch.

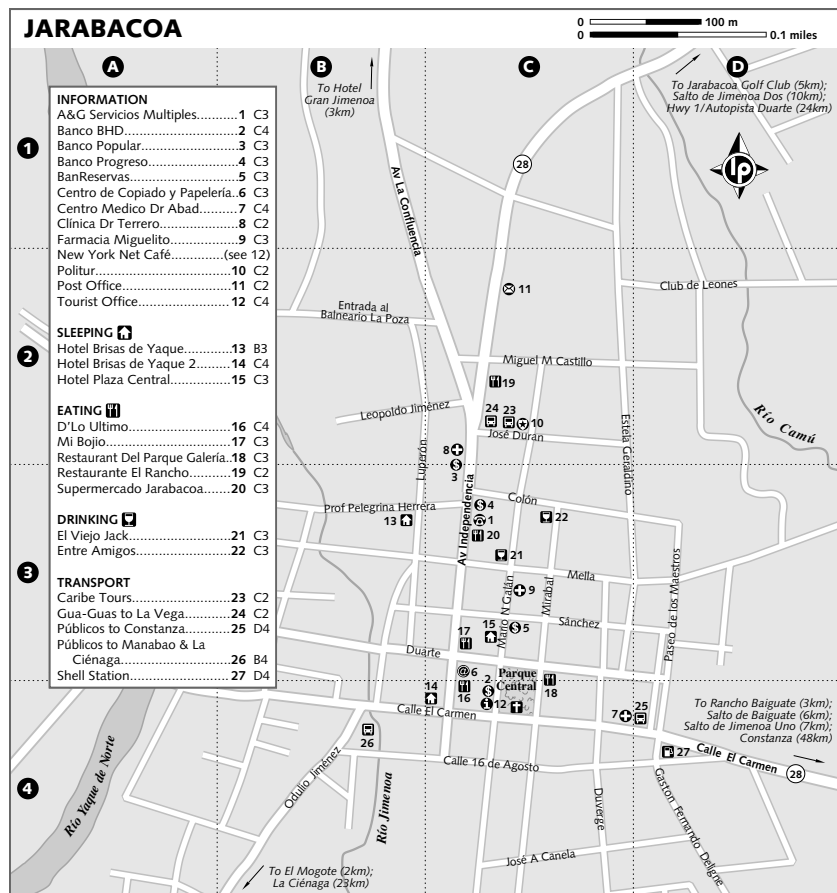
The rapids are rated 2 and 3 (including sections nicknamed 'Mike Tyson' and 'the Cemetery') and part of the thrill is the real risk your raft may turn over, dumping you into a rock-infested surging river – ours did. A cameraman leapfrogs ahead of the group along the riverbank to film you going over each rapid, so you can watch the instant replay afterwards over a beer while rubbing your new lumps and bumps.

The Río Yaque del Norte has level 4, 5 and 6 rapids much further up in the mountains. No official tours go that far, but some guides raft it for fun on their own time. Ask around – if you don't mind paying a hefty premium you might be able to organize something.

A lot of people come from the north coast to do rafting, and then head straight back. This involves at least four hours each way on a bus. Consider spending a couple of nights in Jarabacoa – you'll enjoy your trip much more if you do.

WATERFALLS

So picturesque are the waterfalls near Jarabacoa that an opening scene of the movie *Jurassic Park* was filmed here, using **Salta Jimenoa Uno** as the backdrop. It's definitely the prettiest, a 60m waterfall that pours from



a gaping hole in an otherwise solid rock cliff. (A lake feeds the waterfall via a subsurface drain.) There's a nice swimming hole, but the water is icy cold. The trail to the waterfall is 7.1km from the Shell station in Jarabacoa along Calle El Carmen, the road to Constanza. The road is paved and flat at first, then turns into a winding, hilly dirt road. Look for the access trail on your left opposite a small restaurant – it leads from the road down a steep canyon wall to the falls.

Salto de Jimenoa Dos is a 40m cascade with an appealing bathing pool – but don't, as the currents are sometimes quite strong. The turnout to the falls is 4km northwest of Jarabacoa on the road to Hwy Duarte. Coming from town, you'll reach a major fork in the road with

a large bank of signs, one of which points to the right toward the falls. From there, a paved road leads 6km past the golf course to a parking lot. The waterfall is a 500m walk from there, over a series of narrow suspension bridges and trails flanked by densely forested canyon walls. The bridges were down when we were there (following Tropical Storm Noel) but should be back up by the time you read this.

Salto de Baiguate is also in a lush canyon but isn't nearly as impressive as the others, nor is the pool as inviting. To get there, take Calle El Carmen east out of Jarabacoa for 3km until you see a sign for the waterfalls on the right-hand side of the road. From there, a badly rutted dirt road, which at one

point is crossed by a shallow creek, leads 3km to a parking lot. From there, a lovely 300m trail cut out of the canyon wall leads to the Salto. It's a pleasant walk from town, if you're not in a hurry.

The falls are easy to visit if you've got your own transportation. If not, a *motoconcho* tour to all three falls will set you back around US\$15 to US\$20, and a taxi US\$60 to US\$80. Either way you'll have to pay the park entrance fee (Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50).

HIKING

In addition to the trek to Pico Duarte, there are a number of shorter half-day and full-day walks you can take in the area.

The best day walk is to **El Mogote**, a short peak just 2km west of town. To get there, hop a *motoconcho* (US\$3) or a taxi (US\$7) to the entrance. Just past here you'll encounter a Salesian monastery, where the monks have taken a vow of silence, and who support themselves with a small pasta factory. From here it's a stiff 2½- to three-hour walk to the summit. Start early, wear boots if you have them, and bring plenty of water. It's a slippery walk, nay, slide, down from the top (at least the first half).

There are a couple of other shorter walks you can do in the area, including to La Jagua (around 4 hours; we estimate it's about 6km in distance) and Los Tablones (7 hours; it's about 10km). These trails are poorly marked and it's recommended to go with a local guide (US\$35). You can also join a hiking group with Rancho Baiguate (right), which offers all of these excursions, ranging in price from US\$25 to US\$100 per person.

THREE BEST HIKES

The interior has some great walking trails, both longer treks and day hikes.

- The trek to Pico Duarte (p217) – This is the most popular multiday trek in the country. It can be walked in as little as two days or as many as five days, including some spectacular side trips.
- Loma Quita Espuela (see boxed text, p225) – Rising out of the flat plains near San Francisco de Macoris, Loma Quita Espuela is surrounded by organic cocoa plantations and swimming holes. There's even a rustic cabin owned by a local farmer where you can stay the night.
- El Mogote (above) – This small mountain outside Jarabacoa makes a great day outing. Climb past a Salesian monastery up to the top of the hill for great views of the surrounding mountain range.

GOLF

Just outside of town, the **Jarabacoa Golf Club** (☎ 809-782-9883; 🕒 7:30am-7pm) has a decent though rather nondescript nine-hole golf course that will do for anyone desperate for a golf fix. The course has two par-fives, the longest being 433m. Green fees are US\$20 for two laps around the course. Club rental is US\$10 with balls – oddly, rental is for one round only, so you have to pay it twice if you play 18 holes. To get there, take the turnout to Salto de Jimenoa and look for signs for the *Campo de Golf*, about 3km down.

CANYONING

Canyoning is not especially popular in Jarabacoa, but there are a few places if you need an adrenaline fix. There are beginner and advanced options available.

Tours

Jarabacoa's biggest and best tour operator dominates the stage, leaving but crumbs for the rest. A few smaller outfits come and go, but for safety and reliability we recommend only **Rancho Baiguate** (☎ 809-574-6890; www.ranchobaiguate.com; Carretera a Constanza). While its main clientele are Dominican groups from the capital and foreign guests from the all-inclusive resorts near Puerto Plata, independent travelers are always free to join any of the trips, usually by calling a day or two in advance (except for Pico Duarte, which should be arranged weeks in advance).

Activities have the following prices, all including breakfast and lunch: rafting (US\$50), canyoning (US\$50), mountain biking (US\$25). Rancho Baiguate also offers horseback/jeep tours to the waterfalls (US\$16 to US\$21 with lunch, US\$9 to US\$11 without lunch). Its Pico

Duarte trips range in price depending on the number of people and the side trips you take; a group of four people for three days with no side trips pays US\$300 per person.

Sleeping

Jarabacoa's hotels are excellent value.

Hotel Plaza Central (☎ 809-574-7768; Mario N Galán; s/d US\$17/34; (P)) The principal advantage of this run-down, linoleum-clad flophouse near Sánchez is that it's cheap. The hot water is unreliable and some rooms lack exterior windows, but the mattresses are new and there are ceiling fans. On weekends the disco downstairs plays loud music till late.

Hotel Brisas del Yaque (☎ 809-574-4490; cnr Luperón & Herrera; r US\$33; (X)) This small hotel offers eight excellent rooms, all with balconies, air-con and fridges. Ask for one facing west – the view of the surrounding mountains is excellent.

Hotel Brisas del Yaque II (☎ 809-574-2100; Independencia 13; d/tw US\$45/75; (P) (X)) From the creators of Hotel Brisas del Yaque comes a sequel: 20 rooms in this new, purpose-built hotel will take you on the nocturnal adventure of a lifetime, as you slumber in comfort in rustic surrounds. The twin rooms are distinctive in having two bathrooms, one for each guest. Ask for a mountain-facing room, if only to avoid the noisy streetside market. You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll...sleep.

ourpick Hotel Gran Jimenoa (☎ 809-574-6304; Av La Confluencia; www.granjimenoa.com; s/d/tr/ste incl breakfast US\$50/74/95/117; (P) (X) (A) (B)) Set several kilometers from town directly on the roaring Río Jimenoa, this is easily the best hotel in town. It may be neither on the beach nor an all-inclusive, but you could easily spend a week here without leaving the grounds (the restaurant is excellent). A new wing was under construction when we were there, and most of the old rooms are being remodeled – they may keep a couple unremodeled for budget travelers, so it's worth asking.

Rancho Baiguate (☎ 809-574-6890; www.rancho.baiguate.com; Carretera a Constanza; s US\$77-107, d US\$126-163, tr US\$170-220, q US\$252; (P) (A) (B)) A cross between a summer camp and an all-inclusive resort, Rancho Baiguate offers plain but comfortable accommodations on its 72-sq-km complex, about 3km east of town. Three meals are included in the price. There's a beach volleyball court, a Ping-Pong table, and a pool table, and good bird life for those old enough to sit still. An on-site veggie garden supplies

the competent Dominican cook, and a worm farm and a grey-water treatment plant reduce the resort's impact on the environment. Bring mosquito repellent. The hosts can pick you up from town.

Eating

D'Lo Último (☎ 809-574-7591; cnr Av Independencia & Duarte; mains US\$3-10; (X) breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Thu) This modest Dominican eatery offers reliable and tasty meals. Ask about the daily special; you can often get a salad, a meat-based main with a side of rice, and a dessert for US\$3 to US\$4.

Mi Bojo (☎ 809-574-2422; cnr Av Independencia & Duarte; mains US\$8-15; (X) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Don't let the cheesy decor put you off – the cane chairs may be a little uncomfortable, and the reggaeton on the stereo may not be to everyone's taste, but the food itself is excellent. Go for the stewed guinea hen (US\$12), a local specialty.

Restaurant Del Parque Galería (☎ 809-574-6749; cnr Duarte & Mirabal; mains US\$8-15; (X) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Overlooking Parque Central, this open-air restaurant/bar serves up traditional Dominican meals as well as international favorites. If you're in the mood to try something a little different, the *conejo criollo* (rabbit prepared Creole-style, US\$12) and the *cabrito al vino* (goat in wine sauce, US\$9) are both excellent choices. A great place to people-watch – feel free just to order a drink and check out the goings-on in the park.

Restaurante El Rancho (☎ 809-574-4557; Av Independencia 1; mains US\$8-15; (X) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Part of the Baiguate empire, El Rancho offers a varied menu of chicken and beef dishes, sushi-style wraps and excellent pizzas. The walls of this semidressy, open-sided restaurant are graced with handsome local paintings, although the *motoconcho* traffic outside detracts somewhat from the setting. Be sure to try the chili jam, served as an appetizer with yucca chips. Independent travelers can also inquire here about trips with Rancho Baiguate (p215).

Hotel Gran Jimenoa (☎ 809-574-6304; Av La Confluencia; www.granjimenoa.com; mains US\$14-35; (X) 7am-11pm) Jarabacoa's best hotel also offers one of the town's most notable dining experiences. The restaurant here occupies an open-air deck, shaded by low trees and perched right alongside the roaring Río Jimenoa. Tables along the edge have the best

view – so close you may even feel some errant spray and have to speak loudly to be heard over the river's din. Dishes are fairly standard, though well prepared, including guinea hen or rabbit in wine sauce, and the local Jarabacoa specialty, chicken breast stuffed with cream cheese. Fight the Muzak menace – ask them to turn the stereo off.

Supermercado Jarabacoa (☎ 809-574-2780; Av Independencia; (X) 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) A good-sized supermarket, this place has the best selection of canned food, produce and dry goods in town.

Drinking

Social life in Jarabacoa revolves around Parque Central. The church, the casino and restaurants are all here, and at night the numerous *colmados* pump loud merengue and beery customers onto the sidewalk, where the party really gets going.

El Viejo Jack (☎ 809-574-7536; cnr Mario N Galán & Mella; (X) 10:30am-10:30pm Sun-Thu, to midnight Fri & Sat) This liquor-store-cum-bar is full of enormous glass cases of dust-free premium booze, which Jarabacoa's elite quaff by the bottleful. Balloon wine glasses give a certain panache to sharing an entire bottle of cognac with friends. Big-screen projection TV too, and the beer is icy cold.

Entre Amigos (☎ 809-574-7979; Colón 182; (X) 9pm-late Fri-Sun) This thumping bar is the best party in town – expect merengue, salsa and reggaeton, and elbow-to-elbow service at the bar. There's often karaoke early in the evening, ending at 11pm. After that you'll need earplugs (and maybe before, depending on the karaoke).

Getting There & Away

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-574-4796; Calle José Duran near Av Independencia) offers the only first-class bus service to Jarabacoa. Four daily departures to Santo Domingo (US\$5.40, three hours, at 7am, 10am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm) include a stop in La Vega (US\$2.30, 1½ hours).

Next-door, a **gua-gua terminal** (cnr Av Independencia & Duran) provides frequent service to La Vega (US\$1.40, 45 minutes, every 10 to 30 minutes from 7am to 6pm). If you prefer to hire a cab to La Vega, the ride costs around US\$22.

Públicos to Constanza (cnr Deligne & El Carmen) leave from diagonally opposite the Shell gas station at around 9am and 1pm daily (US\$2.80, two hours). It's a scenic but rough ride in

the back of a pickup truck; the first 29km are on a badly rutted road that winds around denuded mountains, but once you hit El Río, the remaining 19km are on a paved road that passes through a lush valley.

Públicos to La Ciénaga (US\$2.25, 1½ hours) leave roughly every two hours from Calle Jiménez near Calle 16 de Agosto. It's 42km long, of which the first 33km are paved. Returning can be more of a challenge, especially if you return from your hike in the afternoon. Don't hesitate to hail down any truck heading toward Jarabacoa. Chances are the driver will allow you to hop aboard.

Getting Around

The town of Jarabacoa is easily managed on foot, but to get to outlying hotels and sights you can easily flag down a *motoconcho* on any street corner during the day. If you prefer a cab, try **Taxi Jarabacoa** (☎ 809-574-7474), or a good place to hail one is at the corner of José Duran and Av Independencia.

CAR

There are several car-rental agencies in Jarabacoa. We had bad experiences with two of them, and strongly recommend that you bring a car with you if you need one (preferably an SUV). The nearest reliable, trustworthy rent-a-car agencies are in Santiago.

PARQUES NACIONALES BERMÚDEZ & RAMÍREZ

In 1956 the Dominican government established Parque Nacional Armando Bermúdez with the hope of preventing the kind of reckless deforestation occurring in Haiti. The park encompasses 766 sq km of tree-flanked mountains and pristine valleys. Two years later, an adjoining area of 764 sq km was designated Parque Nacional José del Carmen Ramírez. Between them, the parks contain three of the highest peaks in the Caribbean, and the headwaters of 12 major rivers, including the Río Yaque del Norte, the country's only white-water and most important river.

Activities

CLIMBING PICO DUARTE

Pico Duarte (3087m) was first climbed in 1944, as part of a celebration commemorating the 100th anniversary of Dominican independence. During the late 1980s, the government began cutting trails in the parks and

erecting cabins, hoping to increase tourism to the country by increasing the accessibility of its peaks. These days about 3000 people a year ascend Pico Duarte.

For all the effort involved to reach the summit, there actually isn't a great deal to see. Up to around 2000m you travel through rainforest, passing foliage thick with ferns and some good bird life. You quickly pass above this limit, however, and spend most of the trip in a wasteland of burnt-out *pino caribeño* – a monoculture plantation that looks suspiciously like Monterey pine (the stuff loggers like because of its spindly, knot-free branches). Numerous forest fires have left the landscape barren, and the only animals you're likely to see are marauding bands of cawing crows. Amid the bleakness you may see the occasional colorful epiphyte.

You'll enjoy this trip much more if you spend all or part of the journey on the back of a mule – we certainly wish we had.

Orientation & Information

There are **ranger stations** (park admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$1.50/3; ☎ 8am–5pm) near the start of the major trails into the parks – at La Ciénega, Sabaneta, Mata Grande, Las Lagunas and Constanza. As a safety precaution, everyone entering the park, even for a short hike, must be accompanied by a guide.

What to Bring

Cold-weather and rain clothing are musts for anyone intending to spend a night in either park. While the average temperature ranges between 12°C and 20°C most of the year, lows of -5°C are not uncommon, especially in December and January. Rainstorms can happen at any time during the year. While the soil is sandy and drains well, you'll still want a good raincoat plus sturdy shoes or boots.

If you're not climbing Pico Duarte as part of an organized tour, you'll also need to discuss with your guide what supplies to bring.

Tours & Guides

The easiest way to reach the summit of Pico Duarte is to take an organized tour. Prices vary widely and depend on how many people are going and for how long. Expect to pay roughly US\$80 to US\$100 per person per day. Be sure to book at least a month in advance.

Camping Tours (p209) in Santiago is the cheapest, as it caters primarily to Dominicans,

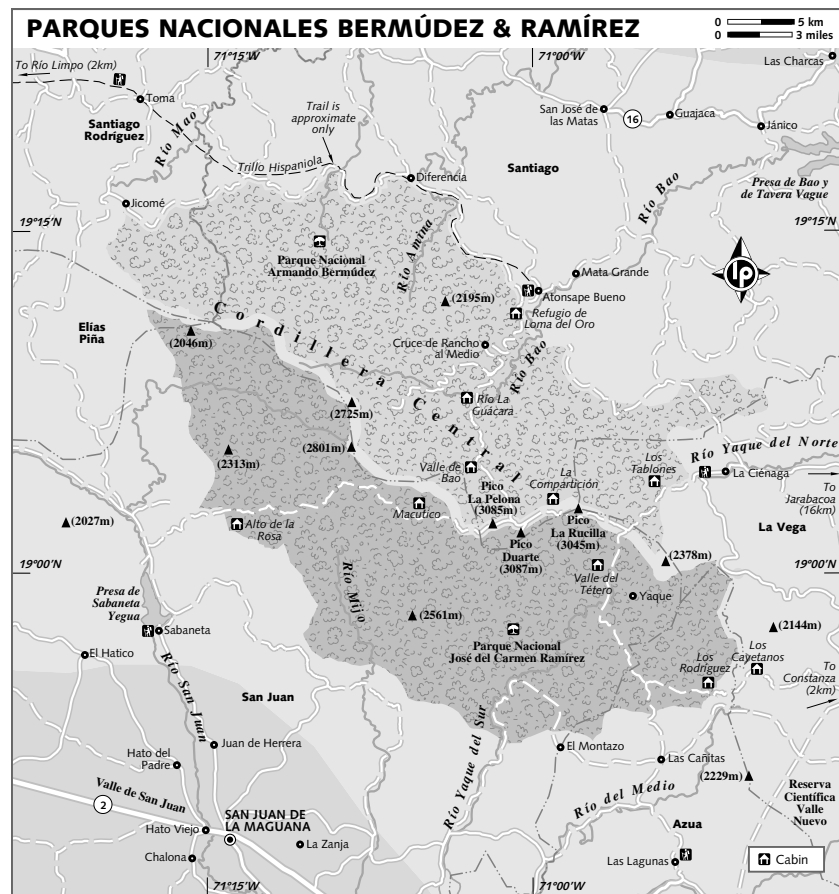
but its guides speak only Spanish. Camping Tours is also your only option if you want to walk Mata Grande to Pico Duarte and exit at La Ciénega. Rancho Baiguate (p215) is the best overall choice for non-Spanish speakers, as it is based in Jarabacoa, and also offers the detour through Valle de Tétero. Iguana Mama (p188) in Cabarete is good if you're in a hurry and want transportation to and from the north coast.

Your other option – assuming you speak good Spanish and you're not in a hurry – is to go to the trailhead in person and organize mules, food and a guide on your own. Mules and muleteers go for around US\$10 per day each, and the lead guide around US\$15 per day (minimum one guide for every five hikers). Be aware also that if you walk out a different entrance than where you came in, you'll have to pay them several days' extra wages for them to get back to the starting point (where they live). Guides can organize basic provisions for you. There is a small spring of drinking water halfway up the trail from La Ciénega, but you're well advised to pack in your own water (water-cooler-sized bottles, which the mules carry).

Attempting to climb Pico Duarte without mules is neither possible nor desirable – you can't enter the park without a guide, and a guide won't go without mules. Plus walking with a full pack in this heat would drain whatever enjoyment you might get from the walk. Mules are also essential in case someone gets injured.

Routes to the Top

There are two popular routes up Pico Duarte. The shortest and easiest route (and by far the most used) is from **La Ciénega**, reached via Jarabacoa. It is 23km in each direction and involves approximately 2275m of vertical ascent en route to the peak. It's recommended to do this route in three days – one long day to arrive at the La Compartición campground, one easy day to hike up and enjoy the views, and one long day back out again. The trip can be done in two days by getting up at 4am for a dawn summit, but afterwards it's a grueling, hot slog down the mountain. Consider also adding a fourth day to your trip to do the side trip to the **Valle de Tétero**, a beautiful valley at the base of the mountain. Three tour companies – Camping Tours (p209), Rancho Baiguate (p215) and Iguana Mama (p188) – offer the trek from La Ciénega.



The second most popular route is from **Mata Grande**. It's 45km to the summit and involves approximately 3800m of vertical ascent, including going over La Pelona, a peak only slightly lower than Pico Duarte itself. You'll spend the first night at the Río La Guácará campground and the second at the Valle de Bao campground. You can walk this route return in five days, but far more interesting is to walk out via the Valle de Tétero and La Ciénega (also five days). Camping Tours offers the trek from Mata Grande.

It is also possible to reach the peak from **Sabaneta** (via San Juan de la Maguana), **Las Lagunas** (via Padre las Casas) and **Constanza**. These routes are little traveled and significantly more difficult, and no tour companies

offer this trek – you'll need to organize a guide and mules yourself.

Sleeping

There are approximately 14 campgrounds in the parks, each with a first-come, first-served cabin that hikers can use free of charge. Each cabin can hold 20 or more people and consists of wood floors, wood walls and a wood ceiling, but no beds, cots, mats or lockers of any kind. That wouldn't be so bad except that the most-frequented cabins have developed a somewhat unnerving rat problem – if you have a tent, consider bringing it along so you can avoid using the cabins altogether.

Most of the cabins also have a stand-alone 'kitchen': an open-sided structure with two or

three concrete wood-burning stoves. Fallen dead wood is usually abundant near the campsites – be sure you or your guide bring matches and some paper to get the fire started.

CONSTANZA

pop 43,000

There's a saying here in the mountains: 'God is everywhere, but he lives in Constanza.' Set at 1200m in a fertile valley and walled in by towering mountains, you can see why – it's a breathtaking spot. Dusk, especially, is awesome – as the sun sets behind the peaks, a thick mist sinks down into the valley floor.

The valley is full of wonderful smells – the chief crops here are potatoes, strawberries, apples, lettuce and garlic, and at certain times of the year the air is filled with the pungent aroma of fresh garlic.

Constanza makes a fine weekend getaway, and during the week you're likely to have the whole place to yourself. There isn't a whole lot to do here, though, and the tourist attractions are of far less interest than the cooler climate and the sheer remoteness of it all.

History

Also calling Constanza home are a couple of hundred Japanese farmers who arrived during the 1950s at dictator Rafael Trujillo's invitation. In return for providing superior farmland at dirt-cheap prices to 50 Japanese families, Trujillo hoped the Japanese would convert the fertile valley into a thriving agricultural center, which they did.

Orientation

The main street is one-way Calle Luperón, which runs from east to west and has a prominent Isla gas station – also known as *la parada* (the stop) – at its eastern end. Most of Constanza's hotels and restaurants are on or near Calle Luperón, although the best hotels are several kilometers outside the city limits. Constanza has a tall radio tower poking up in the middle of town – it's right next to the tourist office and is a useful landmark if you ever get turned around. The *mercado municipal* (municipal market) is at the far western end of town, a few blocks north of Calle Luperón.

Constanza's Parque Central represents the center of town and may be reached by proceeding three or four blocks down Calle Luperón from the Isla station and turning left.

On weekends the park comes alive with locals drinking at the end of the day – a sociable place to hang out for an hour or two.

Information

EMERGENCY

Politur (tourist police; ☎ 809-539-3020) Two kilometers east of town, just opposite the airport.

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyber Biblioteca Emy (☎ 809-539-1372; per hr US\$2) Located across from the baseball diamond.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia San José (☎ 809-539-2516; Miguel Abreu 87) At the northeast corner of the park.

Farmacia Yazdana (☎ 809-539-1142; Luperón 38) Two blocks east of the Isla gas station. Free delivery.

Hospital Pedro Antonio Cespede (☎ 809-538-2420, 809-539-3288; Calle Antonio Isacc; ☎ 24hr) This small hospital has a fully equipped emergency room. On your right as you come into town, just past the airport.

MONEY

Banco León (Luperón 19) On the main drag. Also exchanges traveler's checks.

BanReservas (Luperón 18) Next door to Banco León.

TELEPHONE

Centro de Llamada Israel (☎ 809-539-2160; Libertad 21)

Mi Plazita (☎ 809-539-3239; cnr Luperón & Libertad)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourism office (☎ 809-539-2900; www.constanza.com.do; Calle Viña near Abreu) Next to the radio station, this office has lots of helpful information and friendly staff. Spanish only. Good website (in English and Spanish).

Sights & Activities

Though Constanza is surrounded by mountains, there aren't many established hikes or excursions in the area. The main sights are all quite distant, and require a 4WD to get there. Most hotels in the area can organize ad hoc tours in their own vehicles – ask.

AGUAS BLANCAS

These impressive **waterfalls** are a beautiful but difficult 16km drive from Constanza, and are reputedly the largest falls in the Greater Antilles. The falls – actually one cascade in three different sections – crash some 135m down a sheer cliff into a pretty pool. You'll need a 4WD to get there: turn north at the

Isla gas station and continue past Colonia Japonésa. If you haven't got your own vehicle, many hotels can take you there for around US\$10 per person. The road was washed out when we were there (following Tropical Storm Noel), but will likely be repaired by the time you read this.

LA PIEDRA LETRADA

Meaning 'Inscribed Stone,' **Piedra Letrada** is a shallow cave containing scores of Taino petroglyphs and pictograms, mostly depicting animals and simplistic human-like figures. The site is a good 30km from Constanza via the town of La Culeta. The road to La Culeta is paved, but it deteriorates quickly after that. Ask for directions in La Culeta, as the road is easy to miss. You'll need a 4WD.

SANCTUARIO DE LA VIRGEN DE ALTAGRACIA

If you're driving the main Constanza–Santo Domingo highway, look for this **small church** by the side of the road. It's perched at the top of the highest pass (1300m), and devout travelers frequently stop to light a candle and utter a word of prayer. Those less devout will still welcome the views and the opportunity to stretch their legs. It's about 38km east of Constanza.

SOFTBALL GAMES

One of the most enjoyable things to do in Constanza is to attend one of the friendly **softball games** held almost every night all year long at the local baseball diamond. Games begin at 7pm; there is no admission fee and you can usually find someone selling beer, soda and odd snacks from a cooler in the stands. The stadium is located several blocks west of the Parque Central.

Festivals & Events

Every September – the date varies – Constanza goes nuts during **Fiestas Patronales**, a nine-day-long party that is nominally in honor of the Virgen de las Mercedes, the town's patron saint. There are live music events, beer tents in the park, and the whole shebang culminates in the crowning of the new *reina* – a Miss Constanza pageant, of sorts.

Sleeping

Only two to three hours from Santo Domingo by car, Constanza fills up on weekends and

holidays and empties during the week. Many establishments operate with skeleton staffs in off-peak periods, and prices vary accordingly. You'll enjoy your stay a great deal more if you stay outside of town – the center of Constanza is dirty and noisy, and clogged with the constant din of motorcycles and scooters.

Hotel Aguas Blancas (☎ 809-539-1561; García near 14 de Julio; s with fan US\$15, d with air-con US\$18; (P) ♻️) Near the *mercado municipal*, this small hotel offers seven spotless rooms with tiled floors and private hot-water baths. Some have air-con.

Hotel Restaurant Mi Casa (☎ 809-539-2764; cnr Luperón & Sánchez; r/tw US\$15/26; (P)) A block west from the Isla gas station; rooms here are basic and clean. Only some are tiled but all have private bathrooms. Some rooms lack good ventilation; request one with an outward-facing window for a breeze. The on-site restaurant is decent for breakfast.

Rancho Macajo (☎ 809-707-3805; Carretera Duvergé; half cabin US\$24, whole cabin US\$46, house US\$136; (P)) What is surely unique accommodation in the entire region, this homey retreat-cum-zoo is perched on a ridgeline several kilometers outside of town, and offers four cabins, each with two bedrooms and a kitchen. The eccentric Dominican owner – she calls herself the 'old monkey lady' – keeps a small menagerie of pet primates and parrots. The rooms are nice, the views stunning, and the on-site bar and restaurant serves acceptable if not particularly exciting food. The driveway is a steep, first-gear-only climb in a good 4WD. Coming from town, at the fork in the road in Colonia Japonésa go right (the official tourist map is confusing on this point).

our pick Alto Cerro (☎ 809-539-6192; www.alto.cerro.com; s/d/ste US\$24/30/39, villas for 2/5/7 people US\$52/100/167, camping per person US\$10; (P)) Easily the best accommodation in Constanza, this large, family-owned complex is 2km east of town off the road toward Hwy Duarte. Perched partway up a high bluff, the rooms have terrific views of the whole valley, the bright green fields of carrots and strawberries spread out like a patchwork quilt below. Rooms have high ceilings and comfortable beds; the suites and two-story villas are larger and convenient for their kitchens. Other than the restaurant at the hotel, there are no places to eat without going into town, but the hotel has a small market, where you can buy pasta and other basics for a simple meal. If the hosts like the

look of you, there's a small campground with a bathroom and a wood-fired barbecue.

Eating

Foodies will be somewhat disappointed in Constanza, as there is nothing truly top end.

Restaurant Aguas Blancas (☎ 809-539-1561; Espinosa 54; mains US\$4-9; ☺ lunch & dinner) With a pleasant dining room and excellent food, this is the best value in town. The set meals at lunchtime (US\$4) prove our theory that the smaller the town, the better the rice and beans.

Lorenzo's Restaurant Pizzeria (☎ 809-539-2008; Luperón 83; mains US\$5-14; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Towards the western edge of town, Lorenzo's does good-value steaks, pizzas and sandwiches. At lunchtime it sometimes offers a hearty *sancocho* (US\$4) – a stew of meat, sausage, plantain and potato.

Alto Cerro (☎ 809-539-6192; www.altocerro.com; mains US\$10-25) Located 2km east of town on the highway. The balcony of this hotel's restaurant-cum-bar is the best spot in town to watch the sunset. Beef is the specialty here; go for the *churrasco* (US\$18).

Mercado Municipal (cnr Grateaux & 14 de Julio; ☺ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) A good-sized market near the north end of town, here you'll find a wide variety of locally grown produce.

Super El Económico (☎ 809-539-2323; Luperón; ☺ 7:45am-noon & 1:45-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) Across from Isla gas station, this medium-sized grocery store has canned food, snacks, water, produce and more.

Getting There & Away

The Jarabacoa–Constanza road is worse than your favorite SUV commercial: it's jaw-rattlingly bad. You should not attempt it without a good 4WD and a lot of patience. That said, we saw a lot of Photoshopped images of what the planned new highway will look like – with a 50-year guarantee, or so claims the Brazilian company building it. Should this actually take place, travel times will be cut drastically, making Constanza a feasible day trip from Jarabacoa, and an easy drive in a regular car.

If you're coming from Hwy Duarte, the turnoff at El Albanico is 89km north of Santo Domingo, and from there it's 51km on a well-paved, twisty mountain road. You'll enjoy your time in Constanza more if you come in an SUV, though, as the roads once you get here are pretty bad.

Gua-guas regularly service El Albanico (US\$5, 1½ hours), where you can change for a *gua-gua* to Santo Domingo and La Vega (US\$6.20, two hours). If you're in a hurry, bus company **Linea Junior** (☎ 809-539-2177) offers a commuter service from Santiago to Constanza (\$US7, 3½ hours, via La Vega and El Albanico) at 5am and noon, returning from Constanza at 1pm and 6pm. Call ahead and they'll pick you up from your hotel (US\$1 extra).

You'll pass a small **airstrip** as you come into town. There were no commercial flights when we were there, and it's used more often for *draguero* (drag racing) than for winged flight.

LA VEGA

pop 220,000

About halfway between Santo Domingo and Santiago, La Vega is a small farming town famous principally for its Carnival celebration, the biggest and most lavish in the country (see boxed text, opposite).

The main street is Av Antonio Guzman, which runs north–south and intersects Hwy Duarte on the north side of town. On the northern end of the avenue, there are two hotels and a Santiago-bound *gua-gua* stop; near the central part, you'll find the main plaza, the cathedral, food stands and a bank.

History

La Vega dates to the late 1490s, at which time Christopher Columbus ordered a fort be built to store gold mined in the area. During the next 50 years, the first mint in the New World was established here; the nation's first commercial sugar crop was harvested in the vicinity; and the first royally sanctioned brothel in the western hemisphere opened its doors for business.

But this prosperity came to an abrupt end in 1562, when an earthquake leveled the city. So severe was the damage that the city was moved several kilometers to its present site on the banks of the Río Camú. You can visit what remains of the old city near the town of Santo Cerro.

Information

BanReservas (Adolfo 24) A half-block from the cathedral.

Red Cross (☎ 809-277-8181; ☺ 24hr) Your best bet in a medical emergency.

Sights & Activities

Other than during Carnival, there's no real reason to stop in La Vega. If you do happen

LET THERE BE LENT

La Vega hosts the largest and most organized Carnival in the country. Townspeople belong to one of numerous Carnival groups, which range from 10 to 200 members and have unique names and costumes. The costumes (which can cost up to US\$1000) are the best part of Carnival here – a colorful baggy outfit (it looks like a clown, but is supposed to represent a prince), a cape and a fantastic diabolic mask with bulging eyes and gruesome pointed teeth.

Groups march along a long loop through town, and spectators either watch from bleachers set up alongside or march right along with them. The latter do so at their own risk – the costume also includes a small whip with an inflated rubber bladder at the end, used to whack passersby on the backside. The celebration has been criticized lately for being overly commercialized. Indeed, you'll see booths and VIP viewing areas hosted by Orange, Presidente and other companies, and some Carnival groups stitch the name of sponsors onto their costumes (which are themselves typically bought, as opposed to handmade as in Santiago and elsewhere). But for now, the celebration is still more personal than corporate, and the high level of organization and security are certainly a plus.

to find yourself in town, however, there are a few things worth checking out.

CATEDRAL DE LA CONCEPCIÓN

La Vega's infamous **cathedral** (cnr Av Guzman & Adolfo; ☺ varies) is a fascinating eyesore that looks more like a set of smokestacks than a place of worship. It is an odd mixture of Gothic and neoindustrial style constructed of concrete and decorated with sculpted metal bars and pipes alongside random ornamental windows. It faces the main park and it is impossible to miss.

SANTO CERRO

Just north of La Vega, and several kilometers east of Hwy Duarte along a well-signed road, is Santo Cerro (Holy Hill). Santo Cerro acquired its godly name the old-fashioned way – through a miracle. Legend has it that Columbus placed a cross he received as a bon-voyage gift from Queen Isabela atop the hill, which commands a sweeping view of the Valle del Cibao. During a battle between Spaniards and Tainos, the latter tried to burn the cross but it wouldn't catch fire. And then, with Taíno warriors looking on, the Virgen de las Mercedes appeared on one of its arms. The Tainos are said to have fled in terror.

Today the cross is gone – supposedly it's in private hands, but it is unclear whose – but you can still see the Santo Hoyo (Holy Hole) in which the cross was allegedly planted. The hole is inside the **Iglesia Las Mercedes** (☺ 7am-noon & 2-6pm), covered with a small wire grill and tended by nuns and Jesuit priests. The beige-and-white church with its red-tile roof

is a major pilgrimage site, drawing thousands of believers every September 24 for its patron-saint day. Be sure to look for a fenced-off tree near the steps leading to the church – it is said to have been planted in 1495.

LA VEGA VIEJA

If you continue a few kilometers on the same road that brought you to Santo Cerro, you'll come to **La Vega Vieja** (admission Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50; ☺ 8am-5pm), the original site of the city. All that's left are the ruins of the fort Columbus ordered built, as well as a church. Little of either actually survived the great earthquake of 1562 and most of what remained of the structures was taken to the latter-day La Vega, where it was used in construction.

Sleeping & Eating

Unless you're in La Vega for Carnival, there is no real reason to stay the night. If you do end up needing a place to crash, there's one good, regular hotel and lots of little love motels whose principal business is *de paso* – a few hours' rental – but which may rent you a room for the night.

Hotel Rey (☎ 809-573-9797; Calle Restauración 3; s/d/ste US\$33/49/82; ☎ ☺ ☒) This is a modern hotel with clean though somewhat dated rooms. Each has cable TV. Ask for a room towards the back – those facing the road can get loud. There's an on-site restaurant that serves decent Dominican fare.

Food stands serving fried chicken and *pastelitos* (flaky fried dough stuffed with meat, cheese or veggies) can be found in front of the cathedral.

Getting There & Away

La Vega is a regular stop on the well-covered Santo Domingo–Santiago route. **Caribe Tours** (☎ 809-573-2488; Av Rivera) has its terminal on the main highway 1.5km from the center of La Vega. From there, buses depart for Santo Domingo (US\$4.55, 1½ hours, every 30 to 60 minutes from 6:30am to 7:45pm) and north to Sosúa (US\$5, 2½ hours, hourly from 7:30am to 8:30pm) with stops at Santiago (US\$1.85, 40 minutes) and Puerto Plata (US\$4.55, two hours). Santiago-bound *gua-guas* (US\$1.80, 50 minutes) leave from a terminal on the main road into town about five blocks from Parque Central.

For Jarabacoa, the Caribe Tours bus from Santo Domingo passes the La Vega terminal at roughly 8:30am, 11:30am, 3pm and 6pm (US\$2.30, one hour). Alternatively, *gua-guas* and pickups leave whenever they're full from a stop called Quinto Patio (about a kilometer from the center, US\$2 in a taxi) from 7am to 6pm.

For Constanza, there are two direct buses (US\$5.50, two to three hours) leaving from the *mercado público* (public market) at around 8am and 2pm, though the actual departure times can vary widely. Otherwise, you can catch a Bonaobound *gua-gua* on Av Gregorio Riva south to El Albanico (US\$2.25, 45 minutes), and hail a passing *gua-gua* there (US\$3, 1½ hours).

EAST OF SANTIAGO

MOCA

pop 132,000

The country town of Moca has prospered in recent decades as a result of its production of coffee, cocoa and tobacco. The tallest building in town is also its only tourist attraction, the **Iglesia Corazón de Jesús** (admission free; ☎ varies), with a panel of beautiful stained glass imported from Turin, Italy.

During the 18th century, Moca was one of the Spanish colony's chief cattle centers. Then in 1805 an invading Haitian army took Moca, killed virtually the entire population and burned the town to the ground. Moca struggled back, and in the 1840s began to raise tobacco as a commercial crop; now, some of the world's finest cigars contain tobacco grown on the hillsides around the town.

Moca is on the road heading south from Sabaneta, just east of Cabarete. There's not

much point coming here if you haven't got your own car, but there is frequent *gua-gua* service from Santiago (US\$1.75, 45 minutes) and La Vega (US\$2.10, one hour).

If you're driving, be sure to check out **El Molino de la Cumbre** (☎ 809-781-1256; Sabaneta-Moca hwy Km 34; mains US\$8-15); 14kms before you hit Moca on the road from Sabaneta you'll come to this restaurant perched on the edge of a cliff. The views down to Santiago are amazing, and for the nondriver the cocktail list is extraordinary. Crêpes are the specialty of the house. It's a 45-minute drive from Cabarete.

SAN FRANCISCO DE MACORÍS

pop 157,000

San Francisco de Macorís is a bustling, prosperous place in the heart of the Valle del Cibao. It draws much of its prosperity from the fields of cocoa and rice that grow around it in all directions. (It may also derive some trickle-down effect from the wealthy drug lords who reputedly own some of the huge barricaded mansions visible around town.) There are a number of colonial buildings about the place, and a large, pretty plaza. San Francisco is also home of one of the DR's six baseball teams, the Gigantes (Giants).

There isn't a whole lot to do or see in San Francisco, and very few tourists come here. Probably the best reason to venture out this way is a day trip to Loma Quita Espuela (see boxed text, opposite).

Sleeping & Eating

There's one good hotel in town, and a small rustic cabin inside the national park. A number of budget options also cluster around the main square.

Rancho Don Lulú (r US\$10; Ⓟ) This simple accommodation is just 1km from the Quita Espuela trailhead. There's one double bed in a rustic cabin a couple of hundred meters from the owners' home, where you eat (meals US\$2 to US\$5). Ideal for a taste of country life. Contact the Fundación Loma Quita Espuela (opposite) at least a day or two in advance to reserve the cabin.

Hotel Las Caobas (☎ 809-290-5858; cnr Calle Carrón & Av San Diego; s/d/ste per person US\$50/60/100; Ⓟ ☎ ☎) The 'Mahogany Hotel' lives up to its name, at least in the lobby and the on-site restaurant – mahogany furniture and paneling everywhere. The rooms themselves are pungent with air freshener, but all have a safe, fridge and TV.

RESERVA CIENTÍFICA LOMA QUITA ESPEUELA

The 'Mountain of the Missing Spur' – a reference to the dense underbrush that ripped boot spurs from cowboys, not the *espuela* (fighting claw of a cock, also frequently removed) – is a remote and lovely (and definitely off the beaten track) national park. The NGO **Fundación Loma Quita Espuela** (☎ 809-588-4156; www.flqe.org.do; Urbanización Almánzar, cnr Calle Luis Carrón & Av del Jaya; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) runs the national park on behalf of the government, and is actively involved in developing sustainable ways for the local farmers to use this natural resource.

Many of the local, small cocoa growers whose land borders the national park now produce organic cocoa, and the Foundation helps them achieve organic certification. A beekeeping project is also encouraging locals to keep bees in the national park – having more bees helps the endemic plants fertilize better, and it's extra income for the locals at minimal cost to the environment.

The national park contains the largest rainforest on the island, and is full of endemic species, both plant and animal, that are on the point of extinction. Additionally, more than 60 streams flow from these mountains and provide water to the cities and towns surrounding, making the foundation's efforts critical to the survival not only of the park but also the hundreds of thousands of people who live nearby.

Visiting Quita Espuela makes a pleasant day trip from Santiago or Santo Domingo. The Foundation offers a number of tours, including the hike to the top of **Loma Quita Espuela** (942m, 2½ hours), where an observation tower commands excellent views out over the Valle del Cibao. A guide is mandatory (Spanish only), and can explain the flora and fauna you see along the way. The tour costs US\$12 for a group of up to 15 people. You'll also have to pay the park entrance fee (Dominicans/foreigners US\$0.60/1.50).

For those less actively inclined, there's a shorter walk that tours several cocoa plantations, where you can buy *bola de cacao* – crude chocolate balls that the local housewives grate and sweeten to make hot chocolate. The tour ends at a local *balneario* (swimming hole), where you can take a dip. There are several Taíno caves nearby, too, and, if you're driving, the Foundation staff can take you there for free (or, if not, for the price of the gasoline).

The entrance to Loma Quita Espuela is 14km (30 minutes) northeast of San Francisco de Macorís on a rough road that gets progressively worse. From the center of town, take Calle Salcedo to Av Libertad and turn left. Continue three blocks until you see the *mercado municipal* (municipal market) on your left. Then turn right on Calle Castillo and follow the road out of town as it bends around to the east. The entrance will be on your left, and from there it's two rough kilometers to the trailhead, including crossing a small river. Don't try this without a good 4WD.

The restaurant is open all day, and a pleasant pool beckons out back. Conveniently located just a few hundred meters from the offices of Fundación Loma Quita Espuela.

Getting There & Away

For such a large city, it's flabbergasting that not a single highway is marked 'to San Francisco de Macorís.' The turnoff from Hwy Duarte is about 15km (10 minutes) south of La Vega. The tangle of unmarked country

roads that crisscross the lowland marshes east of the main Santo Domingo–Santiago highway is quite confusing – expect to make frequent stops to ask for directions. It's possible but much more difficult (and on much worse roads) to come south from the coast via Nagua.

Caribe Tours (☎ 809-588-2221; cnr Calle Castillo & Hernández) runs more than a dozen buses daily from Santo Domingo (US\$6.70, 6am to 7pm).

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above – 'Do the right thing with our content.'