

DR'S BREATHTAKING NATURE

Over 25 percent of the country's unique terrain and coastal areas have been protected in the form of national parks, scientific reserves, natural monuments, wildlife refuges and marine sanctuaries, granting access to unimaginable lands and seas. These beautiful and profuse ecosystems are within a conservation plan that boasts 123 areas, which include 29 national parks, 16 natural reserves, 15 scientific reserves, 29 natural monuments and two marine sanctuaries.

Some of the most impressive and diverse untouched landscapes in the Caribbean abound among the country's national parks. Visitors will find a variety of protected areas including mountains with pine forests and misty clouds like the Ébano Verde Scientific Reserve in the central region, and the white-sand beaches of Bahía de Las Águilas in Jaragua National Park at the southwest of the country. Additionally, Los Haitises National Park on the northeast coast features untouched mangroves, while the Cotubanamá National Park along the Caribbean Sea boasts unique hiking trails and caves with ancient Taino drawings.

Below are some of the most important and most visited protected areas in the country.

COTUBANAMÁ NATIONAL PARK

The Cotubanamá National Park, declared a national park in 1975, covers a total area of 420 square kilometers (162 square miles). A prime location for bird-watching, this subtropical and dry rainforest region contains over 140 species of birds, including the rare white-crowned pigeon, the Hispaniola Parrot and the red-footed Boobie. Within the Cotubanamá National Park is Isla Saona, an impressive 110-square-kilometer (42-square-mile) island. As the second most visited attraction, the island is one of the favorites for sun bathing, snorkeling, diving and nature gazing.

LOS HAITISES NATIONAL PARK

On the northeast coast along the Samaná Bay, approximately 600 square kilometers (232 square miles) of unique, diverse areas comprise Los Haitises National Park. Mangroves, estuaries, coves, and bays make up the park, which is well-known for both its magnificent series of limestone caves and its boat excursions through exotic mangrove swamps. Solenodons, bats, tortoises and over 100 species of birds call this protected region home.

JARAGUA NATIONAL PARK

Jaragua National Park, the largest national park in the country, is located within the Jaragua-Bahoruco-Enriquillo Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO), on the southwest coast. Covering many diverse types of terrain, the region includes areas of forest, coast and sea. The park has a great floristic richness and a great biological diversity and much of the vegetation can be considered as little altered by mankind. Guides take visitors through exciting parts of this 1,374-square-kilometer (531 square miles) large region, where they show off native Taino cave art, flamingos, verdant foliage and much more.

Within the Jaragua National Park is Bahía de Las Águilas, which gathers impressive beaches of white sands and crystal clear, tranquil waters. Its one of kind scenery makes this protected area ideal for swimming, snorkeling, walking and enjoying Dominican Republic's true unique nature. There are no hotels and restaurants around the area nor is it an attraction of tourism for the masses. This gives an extra touch for those who enjoy the serenity of breathtaking places.

LAGO ENRIQUILLO NATIONAL PARK

In the southeast, within the national park is the desert island of Isla Cabritos, a 24-square kilometer (9 miles) long piece of land situated in the center of Lago Enriquillo – the largest saltwater lake in the Caribbean. Also the lowest point in the Caribbean, Lago Enriquillo is approximately 43 meters (140 feet) below sea level and is home to a large crocodile population. It is also characterized by being the only neotropic ecosystem that has 3 universally recognized categories of superior management: National Park, RAMSAR Wetland and Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO).

MONTECRISTI NATIONAL PARK

With more than 191 square kilometers (74 square miles) of coastal areas, mangrove swamps, lagoons and offshore keys, this national park in the northwest is a natural beauty with distinct regions and varying weather systems. Offshore cays sit off of the north coast, while forested areas make up much of the rest of the land area in the North. Dry areas without much vegetation lie further in the south. El Morro, a large limestone basin in the park, is a well-known island-like formation surrounded by islands with beautiful beaches.

SIERRA DE BAHORUCO, SIERRA DE NEIBA AND SIERRA MARTÍN GARCÍA NATIONAL PARKS

Meeting the provinces Independencia, Pedernales, Barahona, and reaching into Haiti, the Sierra de Bahoruco mountain range contains scenic local savannas and valleys. The Sierra de Bahoruco is characterized by the variety and particularity of its natural ecosystems that host an important number of species of flora and fauna. It is considered as a center of endemism, which is related to the origin of Hispaniola, formed by the union of two paleo islands that had their particular flora and fauna.

Further north lies the Sierra de Neiba and Sierra Martín García ranges, which are two smaller sections of hills, separated from Bahoruco by the Yaque del Sur River. Sierra de Bahoruco has an immense archaeological value with numerous caves with zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and enigmatic motif pictographs, while the Sierra Martín García holds its own value with a diverse nature that includes montane dry forest, subtropical dry forest, subtropical wet forest and low montane wet forest.

VALLE NUEVO NATIONAL PARK

Over 657 square kilometers (254 square miles) of the central region encompass the Valle Nuevo National Park, a protected forest area that boasts fabulous waterfalls and top-rate bird watching. Some of the regions' most recognized sites include Salto de Aguas Blancas, a 26-meter-tall (84-foot), three-tiered cascade deep in the rainforest, and Las Pirámides, a monument built in 1958 by different personalities in order to thank the president and dictator Rafael L. Trujillo for the construction of the road San José de Ocoa-Constanza.

ARMANDO BERMÚDEZ NATIONAL PARK AND JOSÉ DEL CARMEN RAMÍREZ NATIONAL PARK

Spanning together nearly 1,530 square kilometers (591 square miles), these two parks in the central west circles much of the country's central mountain chain, including the highest peak in the Antilles, Pico Duarte. These parks are home to diverse flora and fauna, including wild boar and the national bird – the palmchat. Accompanied by guides, visitors here may plan hiking and camping trips lasting days that give them a sense of the parks' natural splendor and biodiversity.

NALGA DE MACO NATIONAL PARK

Montane cloud forests make up much of Nalga de Maco National Park, which was established in 1995 and includes an area of 278 square kilometers (107 square miles) in the western central part of the country. Beautiful mountain peaks and caves with ancient Taino Indian drawings await travelers who have the opportunity to take two-day guided excursions on mules.

LA CALETA UNDERWATER NATIONAL PARK

Founded in 1986, La Caleta Underwater National Park is slightly over 12 square kilometers (5 square miles) east of Santo Domingo in the south central region. The waters are popular for diving, as divers may view the Hickory wreckage, a treasure-hunting ship from the early 1980s. The underwater park also has a museum of submerged mud and clay statues of different Taino Gods for divers to delight on.

LAS CALDERAS DUNES

This protected area comprises the largest and most important dune system in the Caribbean. Besides offering a great scenic beauty, the dunes avoid sedimentation of the bay, protect communities from hurricane winds and harbor unique species adapted to these dry and saline environments. Las Calderas provides environments of relevance to migratory and coastal species. It hosts species like red and yellow mangroves, cactus, herons, black seagulls, pelicans and many other unique breeds in this type of climate.

SANCTUARY OF MARINE MAMMALS BANCO DE LA PLATA

Banco de la Plata is about 148 kilometers (92 miles) north of the coast of Dominican Republic and has an average depth of 20 meters (66 feet). Established in 1986, this sanctuary was created to protect thousands of humpback whales who make annual trips each winter to mate and give birth in these warm, calm waters. During the months of November through April, some 2,500 to 3,000 whales – which constitutes 80% of all populations of these North Atlantic whales – come to the sanctuary religiously.

CUEVA DE LAS MARAVILLAS

The Cueva de las Maravillas is located between the cities San Pedro de Macorís and La Romana in the southeast. Stretching through 89 square kilometers (34 square miles), the fascinating cave system contains hundreds of well-preserved pictographs and petroglyphs from the Taino Indians who once inhabited it thousands of years before. Accessible to visitors, the dwelling contains an excellent lighting system and footpath.

LOMA ISABEL DE TORRES NATURAL MONUMENT

The mountain range Loma Isabel de Torres elevates 800 meters (2,625 foot) high with a rich vegetation that includes coastal, ombrophilous, clouded broadleaf and “dwarf” forests. It was the first declared protected area and its floristic wealth is appreciable in 594 plant species; this variability in such little space is an indicator of the ecological balance of the prevailing ecosystem. A looked after route to the top is the cable car that leads to an impressive botanical garden and a replica of the Christ the Redeemer statue.

ÉBANO VERDE SCIENTIFIC RESERVE

Established in 1989, the 29-square-kilometer (11-square-mile) scientific reserve holds claim to over 600 plant species and is nestled in the central mountain range, near the municipality of Constanza. It gets its name from the native ébano verde tree, which stands inside. Unspoiled by mankind, the gorgeous area is home to species like the parrot, parakeet, the carrao and the threatened cigüita of Constanza. Among

the mammals are bats and solenodons. Ecotourism attractions include the Baño de Las Nubes path and the natural spa El Arroyazo.