

SPORT DIVER PRESENTS A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO...

Dominican Republic

DIVE RIGHT IN

We visit sites off the northern, eastern and southern coasts

HIT LIST

Informative list of DR dive centres

10 THINGS YOU MUST DO IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Stay active

Land-based activities from the relaxed to the extreme

PLUS

USEFUL MAP OF THE ISLAND SHOWING ALL THE MAIN HOTSPOTS

From the writer...

With a firm handshake and a 'hasta la vista', my whistlestop tour of the Dominican Republic was officially over. The past ten days had been a dizzy 'overdose' of experiences. Boredom was definitely not an option.

The Ministry of Tourism had organised a full-on recon mission to boldly go and explore as many wrecks, reefs and caves as physically possible. I clocked up more than 1,300km by road and stayed at six different hotels during my stay. But I wouldn't have had it any other way...

This was my inaugural visit to the island and I wanted to maximise the experience. PR official Carlos R Batista had arranged for me to dive on both the Caribbean and Atlantic coasts, starting with Bayahibe then Santo Domingo, Sosua, Cabarete, Las Galeras and finally ending up back at the capital city, Santo Domingo, for some serious tech diving.

My varied itinerary gave me a pretty good idea what the island had to offer above and below the waterline. From big-city life to rustic beach resorts, each place had its own distinct character, which led to some very interesting situations - all positive, I might add!

Bayahibe turned out to be a good all-rounder with beautiful sandy beaches and comfy all-inclusive hotels. The resort catered for a broad range of clientele, from singles right through to families. The St George wreck was the local favourite, but I much preferred the shallower Atlantic Princess.

Santo Domingo was full of history, boutique hotels and intimate restaurants. Not the place I would have expected to find a full-on tech diving centre. There can't be many cities in the world where it's possible to dive an underwater cave and a deep wreck all on the same day.

My first taster of Atlantic coast diving was loaded with swim-throughs, reefs and a visit to La Zingara wreck. Cabarete provided the après-dive activities, culminating with dinner at the famous La Casita de Papi restaurant, an experience not to be missed.

Las Galeras near Samana turned out to be my personal favourite. Not so built up as other areas, with plenty of 'off the beaten track' sandy beaches and local restaurants. A very popular spot for whale watching, divers often hear whale music and have even been known to bump into the odd humpback or two during a dive. Vertiginous walls, wrecks and offshore reefs completed my tour. So the Dominican Republic is not just another Caribbean beach holiday destination. I found a surprisingly good selection of dive sites to suit shallow bimbles right through to serious techies.

Stuart Philpott

Sport Diver photojournalist



Crocodile



Bahia de la Aquilas
- voted the DR's
top beach



Limon Waterfall



Santo Domingo

TOP TEN THINGS YOU MUST DO...

1 Explore Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. If you want history, it is all here - all western history eventually traces back through the meeting of two distinctly different cultures way back in 1492 with the arrival of Columbus. The Ciudad Colonial was even recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1992.

2 Chill out on Bahia de la Aquilas, which is consistently voted the Dominican Republic's top beach, boasting over 8km of bone-white sand lapped by warm turquoise waters.

3 Try kiteboarding in Cabarete Bay, the 'kiteboarding capital of the world'. There are a host of professional schools just waiting to get you started if you have never given it a go. Let's be honest, if you are going to try this extreme sport, this is the place to do it!

4 Go canyoning in the Damajaqua Cascades (27 Waterfalls). It takes an hour-long hike just to get to the start of the adventure, but coming down is much quicker, wetter and a lot more fun!

5 El Carnaval de La Vega is one of the country's oldest, most-renowned carnivals. It is also the most-important cultural event in the province, with the major groups 'The Broncos' and 'The Fieras', or 'Savage Beasts' participating.

6 Visit the Larimar Mines and see the miners up close and personal as they search for the precious stone, which is only found in these specific mines and no where else on the planet. You can even buy some to bring home as a souvenir.

7 Explore the Los Tres Ojos (the Three Eyes) National Park, which features a set of three limestone caves, springs and many stalactites and stalagmites in its grottoes.

8 Go whale-watching from Samana. Every year, more than 50,000 people visit to watch the humpback whales during their mating season between 15 January and 15 March. These mammals come during the winter from the North Atlantic in order to enjoy the warm waters and give birth.

Canyoning in Damajaqua Cascades



Cabarete Bay, the 'kiteboarding capital of the world'



Party at El Carnaval de La Vega



Whale-watching brings thousands of visitors to the island



See cigars being made by hand



9 Dive the St George, a wreck that exceeds 80 metres long and is considered the largest sunken boat in the Dominican Republic. Located off the East Coast, this is best suited for advanced divers, as depths range from 24m-36m.

10 Visit the Tabacalera de Garcia Casa de Campo, based in La Romana, which is the largest handmade cigar factory in the world, employing more than 4,000 people.

Introduction

The Dominican Republic is the second largest nation in the Caribbean. It shares the island of Hispaniola, situated between Puerto Rico and Cuba, with Haiti. The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island and Haiti occupies the western portion. To the north is the Atlantic Ocean and to the south is the Caribbean Sea.

The Dominican Republic has a semi-tropical climate, with an average yearly temperature of 26°C. The rainy season is from May to November, with rainfall heaviest in the northern regions and lighter in the southwest. The hurricane season lasts from June until November, with August and September being the peak months.

The Dominican Republic is geographically diverse for its size, having extensive beaches of white sand, evergreen forests in the highlands, fertile valleys with exuberant vegetation, and even desert zones with dune formations. Its mineral resources include nickel, bauxite, gold and silver. The country is crossed by four parallel mountain ranges running northwest to southeast, with fertile valleys in between. The largest is the Cordillera Central, extending from northwest of Santo Domingo into Haiti. Its peak, Pico Duarte, is 3,175 metres high. It is the highest point in the Caribbean and is often covered with frost during the winter. Along the north coast is the Cordillera Septentrional. South of the Cordillera Central are the Sierra de Neiba and the Sierra de Bahoruco ranges. Between the Sierra de Neiba and the Sierra de Bahoruco is Lake Enriquillo, the largest natural lake in the country, with the lowest elevation in the Caribbean islands. It is also the only saltwater lake in the world inhabited by crocodiles.

The country is divided into 31 provinces and a district, in which the capital Santo Domingo is located. Other important cities are Santiago, San Pedro de Macorís, La Romana, Puerto Plata, Barahona, La Vega, San Francisco de Macorís, and Higüey.

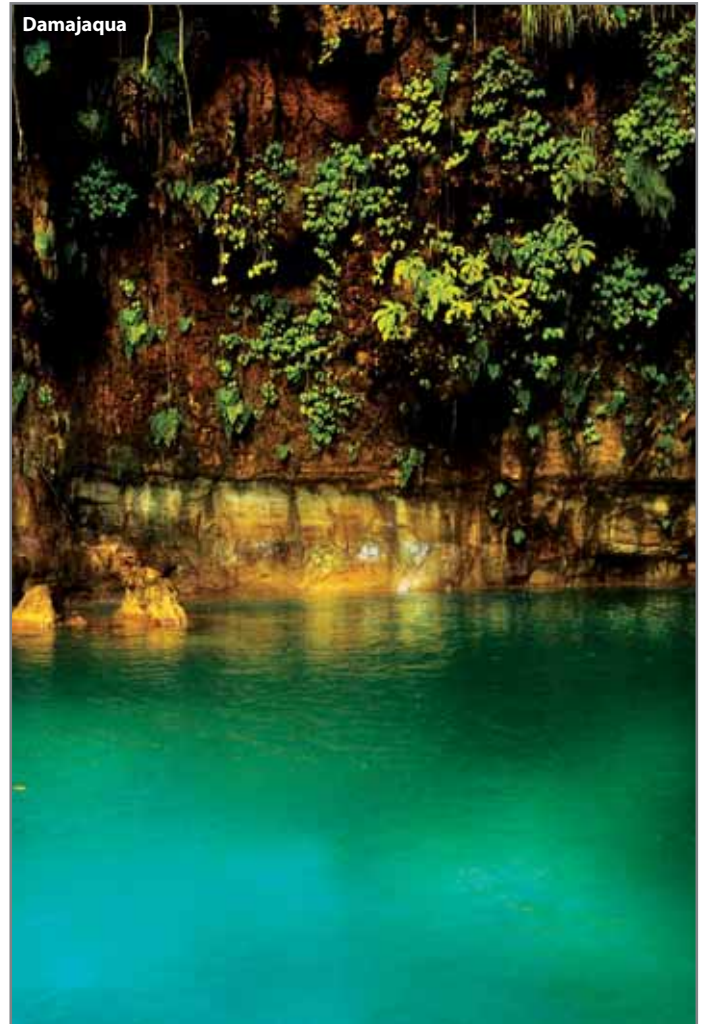


Aerial view of Sosua





Sergeant majors
shoal in the shallows



Damajaqua



Cayo Levantado
Island



A typical Dominican
Republic reef scene



KEY

	City and Town		Beach
	Point of Interest		Protected Area/Park
	Cruise Port		Golf Course
	International Airport		Whales
	Domestic Airport		Highest Peak



Dominican Republic
Has it all

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



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Down South

From the international airport at Santo Domingo, I travelled along the south coast to Bayahibe. I had been booked into the four-star Viva Wyndham Dominicus Beach Resort, but there was no time to check-in or unpack. Carlos, from the Ministry of Tourism, had made arrangements for me to meet Dressel Divers to discuss my diving itinerary. Dressel Divers offered 18 dive sites, including a day trip to palm-fringed Saona Island.

Next morning I boarded Dressel's 12-metre-long trimaran bound for one of the local dive sites. My very first reef dive off the Dominican Republic with fellow Brit Paul Flower, I made the mistake of putting my wide-angle lens on - with hindsight, macro would have been a far-better option, as there were a good variety of stingrays, trumpetfish, morays, scorpionfish and nudibranchs on show. There were a few old cannons and cannon balls lying on the seabed, but nothing truly worthy of my wide-angle lens. Just goes to show it is well worth asking the advice of the local dive instructors before venturing below the surface so you don't make the same mistake I did!

The St George is the best wreck dive in the area. Paul said that divers are not allowed to enter the wreck, and there is a depth ruling of 30m at all dive sites, no matter what certification level. The 74-metre-long freighter lies upright on the seabed. We started off at the prop and spent most of our time exploring the accommodation/bridge area.

My favourite dive turned out to be the second wreck of the day, Atlantic Princess. The 30-metre-long passenger ship was pretty much intact and sitting upright at a maximum depth of 13m. I spent 50 minutes inside the wreck exploring all three deck levels. Most of the interior fittings had been removed, but I found a few washbasins, toilets and a water pump. There was far more to see at the bow, including winches, pulleys, portholes, light fittings and other machinery. Throughout the dive I kept a careful eye open for any sneaky lionfish - yes, the invasive Indo-Pacific species that is the scourge of the Caribbean is here - lurking in the darker recesses.

The all-inclusive four-star Viva Wyndham Dominicus Beach Resort seemed to cater for younger/single Italian clientele. The evening entertainment really started to hot up around 11pm when the cabaret show had finished and the DJ got going.

Laura Gualazzi, the manager of the hotel's resident dive centre, offered daily two-tank morning dives followed by a shallow afternoon reef dive. Maximum journey time to the furthest dive site was approximately 35 minutes (the St George wreck was only seven minutes). I arranged to do two reef dives at Casa Estrella and Aquarium. Despite the shallow depth of these two sites, which makes them perfect for novices, I was overrun with marine life, from moray eels and pufferfish to lobster and barracuda. Both dives were classed as 'drift' dives, but there was barely any current to worry about.

The 4x4 was revved up and raring to go the moment I got back on dry land. Our next stop was Santo Domingo and Golden Arrow technical diving centre, owned by Denis Bourret. Denis is best known for cave diving, deep wrecks and rebreathers. Denis said they offered dives at three caves, four wrecks and six reefs. I booked up for two wreck dives in the Parque Nacional de la Caleta. The dive boat turned out to be the biggest surprise of the day. It was a wooden rowing boat (approximately four metres long) with a small 25hp outboard strapped to the transom. I raised my eyebrows when Denis said that the boat could comfortably carry six technical divers as well as Tito the boat skipper.

The 30-metre-long freighter Capitan Alsina lies at a maximum depth of 36m. She was sunk as an artificial reef project back in the early 1990s. I thought the site was pretty much broken up without many distinguishable features. The second wreck, El Hickory, used to be a research boat owned by Charles Webber, a famous salvage/treasure hunter. The 20-metre-long ship was purposely sunk in the late 1980s. She now lies upright on the seabed at a maximum depth of 20m. This was a great little wreck with plenty of places to poke about and explore.

Denis wanted to show me some of his favourite technical diving sites, starting with the tugboat Don Quiko. This artificial reef project should have sunk in shallower water but ended up at a maximum depth of 67m. The wreck sits upright and virtually intact. I thoroughly recommend a penetration dive inside the engine room.

Our second dive turned out to be a deep exploration of La Taina Caves. Hardened cave divers would have a field-day here, as there were more than 1km of tunnels to explore at three different levels. We investigated the shallow section at 10m and then took a quick look inside the deeper tunnel at a maximum depth of 42m, but this barely scraped the surface - for those suitably qualified, hours of exploration awaits. Denis said: "Where else can you find caves and ocean dives in the middle of a city?"

The prop on the El Hickory



The bow of the El Hickory wreck





French angelfish



Launching the dive boat



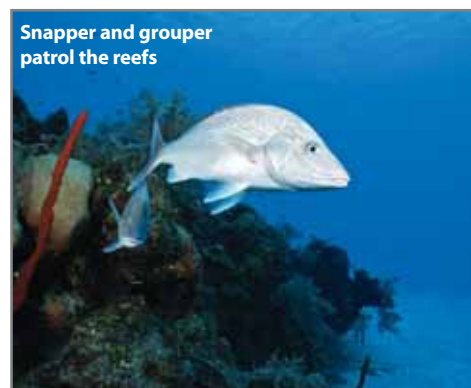
La Taina Caves



Denis Bourret in La Taina Caves



Sergeant majors



Snapper and grouper patrol the reefs

Up North

We sped north to Sosua, near Puerto Plata, for the next leg of my trip. I literally jumped out of the 4x4 and sprinted for the departing dive boat. Dive guide Alex gave me a tour of the 26-metre-long freighter La Zingara, lying upright at a maximum depth of 36m. We started at the bow and then worked our way back towards the stern. The intact wreck had plenty of interesting features, including a huge crane lying over the cargo hold. Inside the small bridge I could see the steering column covered in sponges and corals. I popped my head inside the cabin area and there were benches and other equipment scattered about. As we made our ascent, I briefly stopped at the funnel covered in a huge shoal of grunts. This wreck was perfect for photography, with lots of interesting features and colourful fish life.

Back on dry land Carlos introduced me to Lucas Castellano, the manager of the PADI diving centre based at the four-star, 900-room Casa Marina Reef and Beach Hotel. Lucas said he also had four satellite centres in neighbouring hotels and offered 20 diving and snorkelling sites which were no more than a 20-minute boat ride away.

I also spoke with Robert, a BSAC National Instructor, who had been living in the Dominican Republic on and off for the past 15 years. He told me that La Zingara had been bought by a German guy and then sunk as a diver attraction. Robert said the man's initial intention was to charge every diver that visited the wreck. As an added attraction he dropped thousands of peso coins all over the site.

Carlos said that Sosua was famous for its tasty brand of cheese and salami, but the town also had a reputation for its lively night life. We sat and

watched the Harleys and Hummers cruising up and down the main high street. There were streams of scantily clad girls passing by. This place was definitely a single man's dream - and a married man's severe attack of conscience.

Carlos had booked me into the four-star Viva Wyndham Tangerine. The hotel was full to capacity with French Canadian clientele. We took a stroll to the nearest town, Cabarete, and sampled the local mojitos. The beach-front had a great atmosphere, with a good choice of character bars and restaurants. Carlos recommended eating at La Casita de Papi. The fish dishes were the best choice, served up on a huge metal tray covered in the restaurant's famous Papi sauce. This was the perfect venue to impress the ladies.

We bumped into Brits Chris and Jane Waites, the owners of Dive Cabarete. Chris told me they had sold all their worldly possessions and bought a dive centre in the Dominican Republic. Chris and Jane made a real effort with their customers and offered a top-rate service. Chris said they had approximately 20 dive sites, including the freshwater El Du Du Caves. Just to make life a little more comfy, Chris had bought a brand-new seven-metre-long skiff. This could comfortably carry eight divers and two staff.

Chris took me to one of his favourite dive spots, Tres Palmas. There were overhangs and swim-through caves covered in colourful whip corals and sponges. It was a great scenic dive with plenty to keep me occupied. Chris said: "Puerto Plata is a great place to learn to dive, there are no extreme conditions and a good variety of things to see."

The bow of the La Zingara wreck



The La Zingara is smothered in marine growth



The bridge of the La Zingara



Flamingo tongue



Chris Waites ventures
into a swim-through
at Tres Palmas



Cabarete Beach



Tres Palmas



Go East

The final leg of my journey took me east to Las Galeras near Samana. Carlos had arranged for me to dive with the migrating humpback whales, but we hit two major snags. Firstly, it's against the law to scuba dive with whales (unless divers happen to bump into them during a dive), and secondly, we couldn't find any!

Carlos introduced me to Italian-owned dive centre Scuba Libre, based at the four-star all-inclusive Grand Paradise Hotel. My instructor guide Valerio suggested we dive at Los Carriles, which was about a 25-minute boat ride from the beachfront. Valerio said this would also be our best option for 'bumping into' whales. The dive site consisted of an undulating reef separated by fingers of sand at a depth of around 25m. We found shoaling barracuda, moray and even a nurse shark. I heard whale music throughout the dive from high-pitched wails to deep base moans but nothing to see.

The next day we hedged our bets and headed for Piedra Bonita, another hotspot for whale sightings. The dive site was basically a rocky peak rising to within 8m of the surface. With the sunshine filtering down from above, it made a dramatic-looking backdrop. The surge from the overhead waves caused a few problems keeping steady, but I enjoyed spiralling up to the top of the pinnacle. Again, we heard whales but no sightings above or below the surface.

Valerio said there was only one shipwreck in the area and this happened to be in the middle of the bay at a maximum depth of 20m. The Barco Humdido was sunk around 30 years ago. Valerio said a massive explosion crippled the ship and as she limped into shallower water a second explosion sent her to the bottom. The wreck is approximately 50 metres long and has been flipped upside down. Valerio guided me through the twisted wreckage. In some places the gap between metal and sand was only just wide enough to squeeze through. The upturned hull housed plenty of marine life, from lionfish to barracuda, puffers, French grunts and snapper. The propellers swathed in orange cup corals made a really nice photo composition. When we got back to the dive centre I heard that the other group had sighted whales at Los Carriles, so I had really lucked out on this occasion.

Whale watching is an extremely popular activity at Las Galeras, so during peak season it's difficult to find accommodation unless pre-booked. Carlos managed to find some space at the two-star Hotel La Playita, located near the top end of town. The room was clean and tidy with a fridge, ceiling fan and huge balcony.

I discovered a number of bars and restaurants and even a supermarket just a short stroll from the hotel. The palm-fringed beach was the perfect spot to enjoy fresh prawns served with plantains and rice, all washed down with a pina colada served in a whole pineapple - very exotic! Las Galeras has a laid-back approach to life. Beach lovers will not be disappointed, although the best secluded beaches are way off the beaten track, so a 4x4 is recommended.



Barracuda



Samana is the whale-watching hotspot





Valerio on the Barco Humdido wreck



Piedra Bonita



Valerio checks out a barrel sponge



Las Galeras

Other things to do

As well as scuba diving and snorkelling, there is a whole lot more to the Dominican Republic, and there are a multitude of other attractions and activities to keep visitors occupied as well. Culture-vultures will be thrilled by Santo Domingo, which is far more than just the capital of the Dominican Republic. It is where the New World started. For over five centuries, it has boasted its title as the 'First City in the Americas'. All of western history eventually traces back through the meeting of two distinctly different cultures here one day in 1492, and there are an impressive display of historic monuments that document that earth-shattering event.

In 1992, the Ciudad Colonial (Spanish for 'Colonial City') was recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Ciudad Colonial is part of the original Santo Domingo, and the origin of the district dates back to the 1500s.

The Alcazar de Colon in Santo Domingo was built by Christopher Columbus' son between 1510 and 1514. This restored building was one of the first structures built in the oldest remaining European city in the Americas, and is the oldest Viceregal residence in America.

The Faro a Colon is a multi-million-dollar lighthouse that was built in 1992 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the Americas and is the site of the explorer's bones. It was built from 1948, inaugurated in 1992, and cost several million dollars.

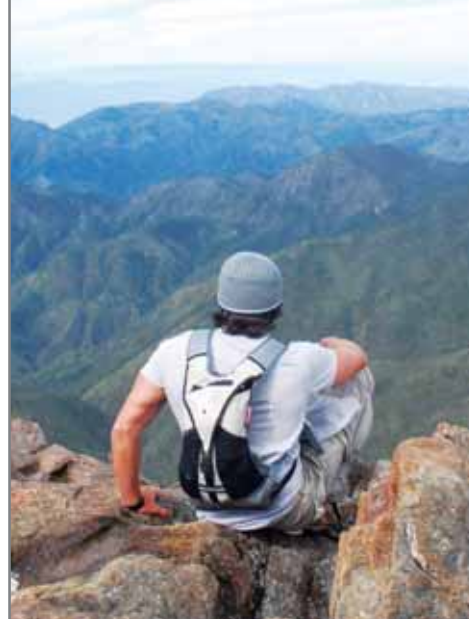
The Dominican Republic is also home to the largest handmade cigar factory in the world, the Tabacalera de Garcia Casa de Campo, based in La Romana. This factory produces some of the world's finest cigars - Montecristo, Romeo y Julieta, H. Upmann, Don Diego, Santa Damiana, VegaFina and Onyx, among others - and employs more than 4,000 people.

There is far more to the Dominican Republic than man-made attractions. For example, more than 50,000 people visit the coastal city of Samaná each year between 15 January and 15 March to head out on boats to watch the humpback whales during their mating season. These mammals come during the winter from the North Atlantic in order to enjoy the warm waters and give birth. There have been times when up to 300 whales have been counted in the area.

For even-more-spectacular views, a trip in the cable car up the Isabel de Torres hill overlooking Puerto Plata is a must. Or for something even more exciting, how about a helicopter tour to get an aerial view of the exotic landscape?

Back at ground level, you can explore the Los Tres Ojos (the Three Eyes) National Park, which features a set of three limestone caves, springs and many stalactites and stalagmites in its grottoes. If all this sounds a bit tame and you want to get your adrenaline pumping, then a canyoning trip is sure to get your heart racing. One of the most-popular trips takes in the Damajaqua Cascades (27 Waterfalls), a series of waterfalls about 45 minutes from Cabarete. In order to enjoy the canyoning adventure, you hike up the mountain for about an hour until you reach the falls and work your way back down the river by jumping and sliding through pools of water. Cabarete Bay is known as 'the kiteboarding capital of the world', and there are a host of professional schools just waiting to get you started if you have never given it a go, or rent you equipment if you are already a competent kiteboarder.

Pico Duarte



Teleferico Isabel de Torres



San Felipe fortress





East Coast

Casa Daniel (T) (C)
Swiss Diving Centre
Bayahibe
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Email: casa-daniel@gmx.net
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Dressel Divers International
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Web: www.bv-diveacademy.com

Scuba Caribe
Riu Hotels
Punta Cana and Puerto Plata
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www.scubacaribe.com

Dolin Dive Centre (Hotel Fiesta & Palladium)
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Web: www.dolindivecenter.com

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Gri Gri Divers (T) (C)
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North East Coast

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Web: www.las-galeras-divers.com

Las Terrenas Divers
Hotel Bahia Las Ballenas
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Tel: +1 809 240 6066
Web: www.lt-divers.com

Turtle Dive Centre (T)
Las Terrenas, Samana
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Web: www.turtledivecenter.com

North Coast

First Class Divers
Villas Cofresi, Puerto Plata
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Seapro Divers
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Diwa Dominicana
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Tel: +1 809 261 3150
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Northern Coast Aquasports
Sosua
Tel: +1 809 571 1028
Email: info@northerncoastdiving.com
Web: www.northerncoastdiving.com

The Big Blue
Puerto Plata
Tel: +1 809 571 2916
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Web: www.big-blue-diving-sosua.com

Scuba Elite (C)
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Web: www.scubaelitedr.com

Dive Center Merlin
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Aqua Centre
Casa Marina Beach & Reef
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South Central Coast

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Tropical Sea Divers (C)
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Web: www.tropicalseadivers.com

Treasure Divers (C)
Boca Chica
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Email: contact@treasure-divers.net
Web: www.treasure-divers.net

Gus Dive Centre
Santo Domingo
Tel: +1 809 566 0818
Web: www.gusdivecenter.com

(C) Cave diving available
(T) Technical diving available