

# North Coast



Within two hours' drive of Puerto Plata's international airport, you'll find all the best that the north coast has to offer – water sports and beach nightlife in Cabarete, mountain biking in the coastal hills, the celebrated 27 waterfalls of Damajagua, sleepy little Dominican towns where it's still possible to escape the tourist hordes, and mile after mile of that famous Caribbean sand.

Puerto Plata's all-inclusive resorts continue to draw a steady stream of package tourists, but it's Cabarete that shines as the north coast's center for independent travelers. This one-street town hit the big time when the winds were judged world class for kitesurfing, and up and down the street you'll hear half a dozen languages chasing the latest adrenaline-pumping activities – kitesurfing, of course, but also surfing, wakeboarding, windsurfing, mountain biking, and followed always by dinner and drinks on the beach.

Those looking for less action and more beach time – and who don't mind renting a condo – will find Cofresí or Costambar to their taste. Both sit just a few kilometers outside of Puerto Plata, and their large, condo-dwelling expat populations have the beaches almost entirely to themselves. Theme park fans will enjoy Ocean World, on Cofresí beach, where you can swim with the dolphins, but still gamble at the casino till dawn.

The north coast is bookended by two completely different towns: Río San Juan to the east and Monte Cristi to the west. Set amid the dry desert scrub near the border, Monte Cristi is the obvious launching pad for an expedition to Haiti, but otherwise holds little of interest. Río San Juan is a sleepy little town that sees few tourists, and yet is a good base for spending time on Playa Grande, one of the most beautiful beaches on the island.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Climb up through the **27 waterfalls of Damajagua** (p196), then leap and slide down into crystal-blue pools
- Dig your toes into the sand and your fork into some great grub while dining on the beach in **Cabarete** (p184)
- Marvel at the many shades of amber in Puerto Plata's **Museo del Ambar Dominicano** (p168), the museum that inspired the movie *Jurassic Park*
- Find tranquility in the typical small-town Dominican atmosphere of **Río San Juan** (p192)
- Worship the sun as the waves crash nearby on beautiful **Playa Grande** (p193)



## HISTORY

Cabarete is the tourism capital of the north coast, but until about 20 years ago, the town existed only as a small farming hamlet. It was only the discovery by a pioneering windsurfer in the 1980s that the wind and waves were perfect for the sport that marked the beginning of Cabarete as we know it today.

Sosúa, Cabarete's seedy neighbor, was populated in 1940 by around 350 Jewish families fleeing Germany and other parts of Europe. Most left after just a few years, but not before building many fine homes and establishing what is to this day the DR's most recognizable cheese and dairy company.

Puerto Plata, the largest city on the coast, has a much older past – Columbus founded the city in 1493. As he approached the bay, the sunlight reflected off the water so brilliantly it resembled a sea of sparkling silver coins. Columbus named the bay Puerto Plata (Silver Port). He also named the mountain that looms over the city Pico Isabel de Torres (799m), in honor of the Spanish queen who sponsored his voyages.

An important port for the fertile north coast, Puerto Plata – and, indeed, the entire north coast – was plagued by pirates. It eventually became more lucrative for colonists to trade with the pirates (who were supported by Spain's enemies, England and France) rather than risk losing their goods on Spanish galleons. Such trade was forbidden and enraged the Spanish crown. In 1605 the crown ordered the evacuation of Puerto Plata – as well as the trading centers of Monte Cristi, La Yaguana and Bayajá – rather than have its subjects trading with the enemy.

The north coast remained virtually abandoned for more than a century, until the Spanish crown decided to repopulate the area to prevent settlers from other countries – namely the French from present-day Haiti – from moving in. Puerto Plata slowly regained importance, suffering during the Trujillo period, but eventually reinvented itself as a tourist destination. The early 1990s were golden years for the city, and for the first time tourism revenues surpassed those of its three main industries – sugar, tobacco and cattle hides – combined.

## GETTING THERE & AROUND

Aeropuerto Internacional Gregorio Luperón is the second-largest airport in the country,

and within two hours' driving distance from almost everywhere on the north coast. It's also your best place to rent a car, although you'll probably want an SUV, considering the state of the roads. Buses and *gua-guas* (small buses) offer frequent service all along this coast – it's as easy as sticking your hand in the air – although you may find the cost of the fare to be inversely proportional to your Spanish language ability.

## PUERTO PLATA

pop 147,000

A wag in a bar put it this way: Puerto Plata is a charmless city, yes, but it's a city full of charming people. We agree.

While the Puerto Plata region boasts some of the best the country has to offer, the city itself is a working port town. It has a few interesting museums, and the cable car ride to the nearby bluff is worth the trip, but the accommodation options are poor – make Puerto Plata a day trip, and stay elsewhere, in the many welcoming towns along the coast.

A 2006 city project saw new sand dredged in and deposited along the coast, making the city beach and the beaches at Playa Dorada and Cofresi significantly more attractive. In a less welcome development, the government kicked all the street vendors off the oceanside boulevard and bulldozed the beach shacks at Long Beach, laying down pretty new paving stones but producing a character-free, sterile beach environment.

## ORIENTATION

The center of town is Parque Central, which was under rigorous renovation when we were there – the park had been torn out and new, sterile red pavers were being laid. Most of the trees had been cut down too, but there might be some flowers and benches when they finish. Five blocks north of the park is the Malecón (main street; literally 'sea wall') and beyond that the ocean. The Malecón (also known as Av General Luperón and Av Circunvalación Norte) runs along the shore – Long Beach, the main city beach, is located 2km east along the center, but is nothing special. The other main east-west street is Av Beller (pronounced, oddly, 'Bell-AIR'), which runs along the north side of the park and feeds onto Av Luis Ginebra.