

The Southwest



Few travelers come to the southwest. There's a reason for that: it's remote, and its treasures yield themselves only to those who apply the effort. It's worth it, though – miles of pristine, empty beaches, twittering birdsong in the cloud forests of the mountains, and the striking dry desert landscape of cactus stretching all the way to the border.

The remoteness and loneliness add savor and spice to the adventure. Bahía de Las Águilas is a stunning stretch of 10km of yellow sand. That you have to take a boat to get there – and that there won't be any tourists there except for you – transform it into one of the most beautiful beaches in the country.

The infrastructure here remains poor – roads are bad and telephone service sketchy. But for those looking to disconnect from the wired world, this may be a blessing in disguise. Where else can you sleep in a cabin on top of a fog-bound mountain in the Caribbean and be completely confident that your BlackBerry won't work?

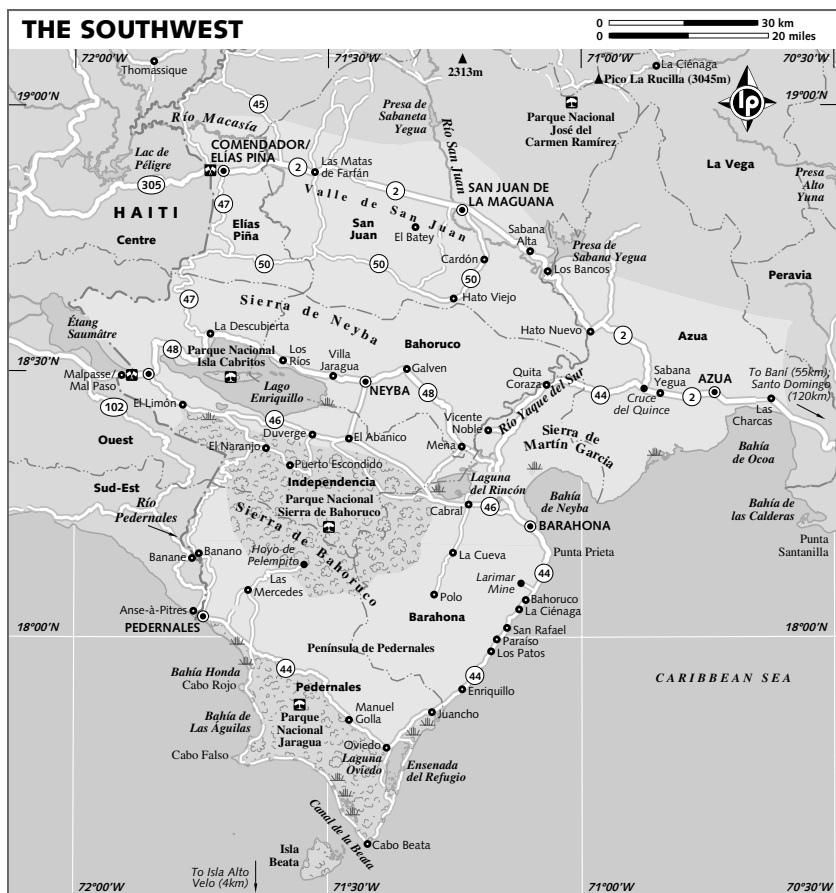
Towards the Haiti border you'll find Lago Enriquillo, an inland sea and remnant of the strait that once divided the island from Barahona to Port-au-Prince. Everywhere you'll see rocks of fossilized coral and, in the middle of the lake, Isla Cabritos, a national park where unique, endemic varieties of plants and animals thrive.

Last but not least, the larimar mine just south of Barahona is the only larimar mine in the country and, indeed, the world. You can visit the mine and buy crude stones directly from the miners or purchase cut-price jewelry from the small workshops that cluster both at the mine and the coastal towns nearby.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Savor the coolness and tranquility of the cloud forest at the remote cabins of **Cachóte** (p235)
- Delight in the untouched beauty of deserted **Bahía de Las Águilas** (p237), the most remote beach in the country
- Spot flamingos and turtles on a boat tour to super-salty **Laguna Oviedo** (p236)
- Marvel at cactus flowers, butterflies and beefy iguanas on **Isla Cabritos** (p240), the lowest point in the Caribbean
- Get caffeinated at the **Polo Organic Coffee Festival** (p240) on the first weekend in June





GETTING THERE & AROUND

Although there's one nominally international airport just outside of Barahona, no commercial airlines fly there, so your only way to get here is by bus or car. Caribe Tours has regular service to Barahona and San Juan de la Maguana, but after that only *gua-guas* (small buses) transit the rest of the region. Because of union agreements, *gua-guas* plying the coastal highway do not stop at every town along the way, even though they pass right through them. Be careful to get on the right bus, or else you'll be let off outside of town and you'll have to walk or catch another ride in.

If you're thinking of renting a car, be warned on two counts: there are no rental car agencies of any kind in the southwest, so rent

something in Santo Domingo; and two, if you plan on going even 100m off the side of the highway, you're going to want a really good 4WD – the roads here are astonishingly bad.

The coastal road between Barahona and Pedernales is one of the few places in the country where hitchhiking is common and reasonably safe. Only hitchhike during daylight hours, and offer the driver a buck or two (although he'll probably refuse it).

INLAND

Three highways lead west to the Haitian border. Fifteen kilometers west of Ázua the highway branches west to San Juan de la Maguana