

LAND *of the* LOST

A road trip through the far side of the **Dominican Republic** leads (literally) to paradise.

BY **KEVIN RAUB** | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BEN DEPP**



Channeling your inner Jack Kerouac and hitting the open road is about as Americana as it gets. Change borders, though, and things get a little more dicey. There are funny road signs in foreign languages, peculiar traffic laws, strange animals in the path of oncoming traffic and awful radio stations. Fumble around long enough with the latter (and you will most assuredly twiddle for ages to find an agreeable station), and you could easily wind up in trouble with any number of the former.

This is pretty much how my Dominican Republic road trip has begun. From the moment I dead-ended at the Caribbean Sea in Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial and hung a right at the seawall — something almost no visitors to the DR ever do — my radio has been seeking station after station of rambling nonsense intertwined with long gaps of silence. I can feel the misery setting in and am starting to wonder why I embarked on this little journey.

But suddenly, the travel gods cut me a break. About 140 miles southwest of Santo Domingo, along the coast of the Pedernales Peninsula (a largely unexplored portion of the Dominican Republic that hugs the Haitian

border), a transcendent travel moment rears its beautiful head: A radio station pops into place, and the deliriously syncopated guitar sounds of this country's homegrown and crazily addictive romantic music, *bachata*, belts from the speakers just as I crest a cliff-hugging incline along Highway 44, south of Barahona and near the entrance to a small town called — get ready for this — Paraíso.

All at once, like a mirage, it appears, set against one of the most dazzling, jagged coasts of Tiffany box-colored turquoise sea that I have ever seen, and accompanied by a bachata

soundtrack. It's a knockout recipe for paradise — hence its moniker (this had to have been one of the easiest towns to name in the history of town-naming).

So, welcome to Punta Cana, right? *Wrong.* Caribbean geography enthusiasts will note that to reach the Punta Cana area, you take a left turn at the seawall in Santo Domingo. The truth is, this couldn't be farther away without leaving the grounds of the Dominican Republic altogether. And that's just the way I like it.

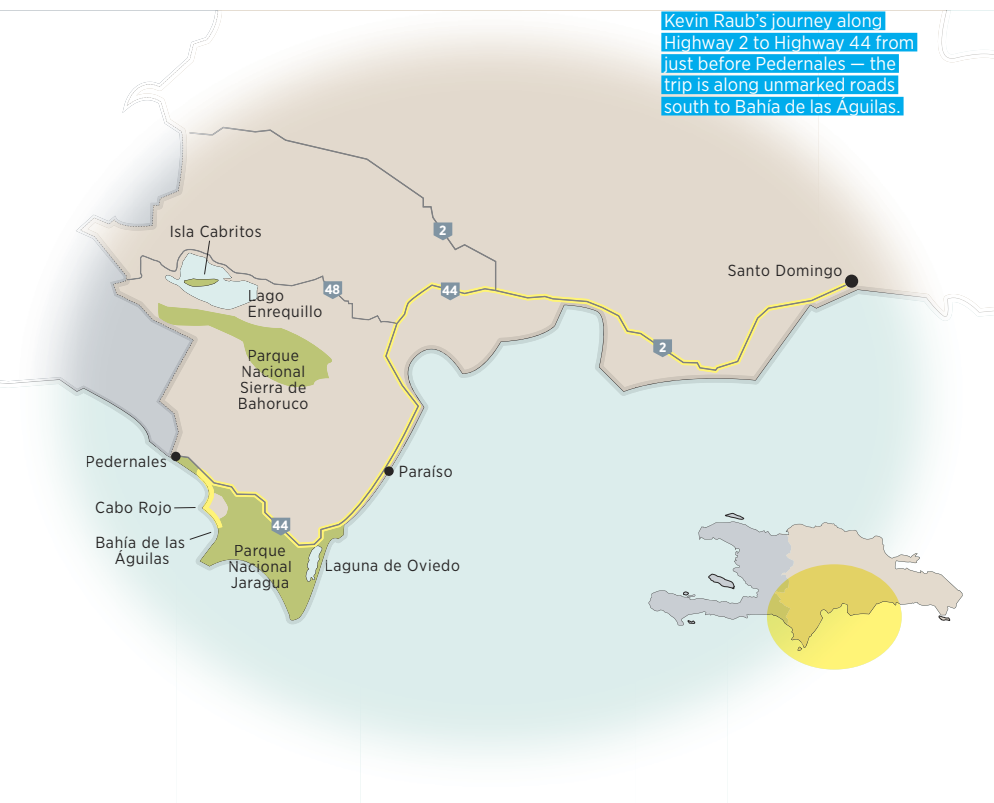
Of the more than four million visitors who chose the

ABOVE: The road in the Pedernales region, offering a drive through an enchanting countryside; and the coast in Paraíso, a seaside paradise



Dominican Republic as the spot to plant their toes in the sand in 2010 (the highest visitor total in the nation's history), nearly 60 percent of them flew straight into Punta Cana, the go-to fun-and-sun spot in the Dominican Republic, if not in all the Caribbean. Nearly everyone else flew into Santo Domingo and ended up in Punta Cana, anyway. Endless sugar-white sands, impeccable palms, dreamy waters, pristinely manicured golf courses and all-inclusive resorts for any budget make the gorgeous region a tourism juggernaut. In fact, the all-inclusive vacation has become so synonymous with Punta Cana that very few independent travelers even bother going to the Dominican Republic. Except for me. And my Chevy Spark.

AS I MAKE MY WAY ALONG THE COAST of the criminally undervisited Pedernales Peninsula, the obvious question is: Why am I here? My destination is Bahía de las Águilas, an 8-kilometer deserted stretch of cinematic beach in the far-flung corner of the Dominican Republic that most folks have never even heard of.





“Tourists don’t know about the beauty and the variety of this region.”

It’s the most remote, hardest-to-reach beach in the country — and many consider it to be the most beautiful, as well.

Beginning south of Barahona and extending south and west to the Haitian border, the Pedernales Peninsula is last call in the DR; an isolated, cactus-strewn desertscape more reminiscent of the American Southwest than anything anyone imagines in the Caribbean, though that isn’t far, either. The coastal waters here are as beautiful as any in the world, a kaleidoscopic swirl of the entire spectrum of blue, backed by dramatic cliffs, polished-stone beaches and a wealth of incredible national parks that almost nobody outside the Dominican Republic knows a thing about. Whereas Punta Cana

is more about downing endless cocktails and gorging on bottomless buffets (I’m not saying that’s not awesome), Pedernales is an ecotourism startup catering to sustainably inclined nature lovers, solitude seekers and those just crazy enough to go against the grain of tourism brochures, travel agents and whatever the Joneses are doing.

So, why do so few go? That’s a very good question — and one that tour operators and hoteliers in the region would very much like answered. I haven’t seen a tourist since I stopped for dinner the evening prior at Casa Bonita, one of the little-known gems of this coast. Perched dramatically on a hillside between Caribbean waters and misty, coffee-strewn mountaintops, this former vacation

home for a wealthy Dominican family is now a charming boutique hotel. Knowing it would be my last meal of significant substance as I drove into more remote areas the next day, I stuffed myself on an extraordinary organic artisanal baked cheese (from nearby Polo, the organic-coffee capital of the DR), followed by an organic-lemongrass filet of beef. Organic Polo coffee followed, of course — and it was probably the best cup of joe I’ve ever had in the Caribbean.

ALTHOUGH IT PROBABLY GOES WITHOUT saying, sunrise in Paraíso isn’t something soon forgettable. I meet up with a clairvoyant Frenchman named Johan Guyot, whose psychic abilities included the good sense to relocate here about seven years ago and open EcoTour Barahona, the lone gunman of note for sustainable tourism in the region. “Tourists don’t know about the beauty and the variety of this region,” he says, stating the obvious. “In fact, actual tourists here often feel like pioneers enjoying the authentic, virgin and unknown.”



Guyot tells me about the '80s tourism surge in the country, when investments in tourism infrastructure were entirely dedicated to the all-inclusive sun-and-beach concept in the eastern and northern parts of the country. "[But] most of the beaches [here], like the Bahía de las Águilas, are protected by the Dominican Republic Ministry of the Environment, so tourist development didn't include the Southwest," he explains.

Since Paraíso is pretty much the last significant — if you can call it that — population center from here to the border, Guyot helps me plan my route (not tough — there is only one road) and logistics for the day. I step on the gas, bypassing the Larimar Mine, another little gem in the area (no pun intended). Notice I used the definite article *the* — this is the world's *only* larimar mine, the one spot in the world where this semiprecious stone is found, born here in such abundance that it's fairly common for larimar to wash up in a variety of creeks and beaches in the area. Its

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Enriquillo at night; Paraíso; a boat ride to Bahía de las Águilas; boats at Laguna de Oviedo; and a horse near the beach in Los Patos

color, described on Wikipedia as "white, light blue, sky blue, green-blue and deep blue," is pretty much a metaphor for the surrounding seas, so its wealth here is more than fitting. But I'm more of a green kind of guy, so I head first toward an astonishing trifecta

of natural attractions in the DR's southernmost point.

Parque Nacional Jaragua, Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco and Lago Enriquillo/Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos together form the Jaragua-Bahoruca-Enriquillo Biosphere Reserve, the first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in the country. Jaragua is home to both Laguna de Oviedo — a hypersaline lagoon that's considered one of the most biodiverse spots in the Caribbean and is packed with flamingos and sea turtles — as well as my utopian beach, Bahía de las Águilas. Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco is the bird-watching capital of the DR, with more than 50 species of birds, including the white-necked crow, which can only be

seen on Hispaniola. Lastly, at 138 meters below sea level, the brackish Lago Enriquillo boasts the lowest point in the Caribbean. In the middle of the lake sits the protected Isla Cabritos, home to Mini Cooper-size Ricord's iguanas, an estimated 200 American crocodiles and an incalculable number of

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egrets and flamingos. Together, the three areas form what is surely the most undervisited, underpromoted and under-the-radar ecological hot spot in the Caribbean.

When I pull up to the Lago Enriqueillo visitor's center, the parking lot is empty, and, despite the fact that it's past opening hours, no members of the guide association that leads tours to Isla Cabritos are anywhere to be found. What are here, however, are the aforementioned iguanas, in such numbers that the whole place feels eerily prehistoric. Everywhere I look, massive iguanas are creeping about — not one of which seems the least bit afraid of me. Quite the contrary, I feel as though I've woken up in an episode of *Land of the Lost*, and unbeknownst to me, I'm what's for dinner.

I find a phone number for English speakers to ring up the guide association, and when I call, I'm told that today is a holiday and that while things *should* still be running as usual, the guides had had a few too many *Presidentes* the night before and, as such, they wouldn't be stumbling into work anytime soon. I return to my Chevy Spark

with the idea of flamingos still dancing in my head but fully content with just the visions of Ricord's iguanas. Isla Cabritos was meant to be a mere pit stop, anyway, on my way to paradise found.

ARRIVING IN BAHÍA DE LAS ÁGUILAS is no small feat. If you have ever read Alex Garland's *The Beach* (or seen Leonardo DiCaprio's ill-advised Hollywood version) or watched films like *Y Tu Mamá También*, it's kind of like that. The last gas stop was in Enriqueillo, 44 miles in my rearview mirror, and I haven't passed another vehicle for at least 30 miles. I think I saw a stray burro grazing on a dead cactus far off on the horizon at one point. I take a left off Highway 44 for Cabo Rojo, a barely marked, fumble-with-the-radio-and-you'll-miss-it turn about seven miles east of the end of the line in the twin border towns of Pedernales/Anse-à-Pitres.

Four miles later in Cabo

Rojo — which is definitely vying to be the Most Beautiful Immaterial Port on the Planet — the road turns to dust and gets very ugly. My Chevy Spark is not meant for off-roading, so I'm forced to slow to a crawl for the next four miles, lest I leave an axle here for nobody else to find. Eventually, I arrive in Las Cuevas; there's nothing but a magnificent seafood restaurant called Rancho Tipico. On the menu, two things: mofongo (a DR staple of African origins, it's a mishmashed concoction of fried green plantains, garlic, olive oil, pork cracklings and various seafood stuffings), and various transport prices to Bahía de las Águilas (which can only be reached by boat). I have a small chuckle between bites of my dreamy octopus mofongo with


a view, as I see that options become cheaper as groups become larger, with the most economical per-person price requiring a group of at least 16 people. The thing is, though, I haven't seen that many people in my two days here!

But the travel gods come

ABOVE: A boat bound for Bahía de las Águilas (**RIGHT**) leaves from La Cueva, entering into blue waters that make the real world seem miles away.



through once again, as there is one Dominican family climbing into a small boat just off the restaurant's pier. I ask to join, pleasant-ries are exchanged, and off we go together to a beach even most Dominicans can only dream about. The 10-minute ride is all shock and awe, past gorgeous cliffs with cactuses clinging to the craggy edges, weaving in and out through storybook rock formations and dodging sea-diving pelicans.

They say it's the journey, not the destination. But they are wrong. Suddenly, Bahía de las Águilas comes into focus and a collective gasp is let out on the boat. The unadulterated, gleaming sands and jungle-green vegetation, stretching off into the distance as far as the eyes can see in a spectacular slow arc between two prominent capes, are inexpressible by poet or silver screen. There isn't a soul on it. The soundtrack is silence — not so bad after all. 

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