

Dominican Republic--Taking the Merengue to Extreme Heights ©
By Amber Borowski

I wobbled up the final passage of the rigorous ascent. My feet were swollen with blisters and my dirt-splattered legs screamed out in fatigue. In the past few days I had mountain biked, bushwhacked, swam, climbed and rafted, all on minimal sleep. I looked like a woman in dire need of a vacation, when in fact, I was on one.

I was in the Dominican Republic--the Caribbean's answer to extreme outdoor vacations. As the only place in the Caribbean that offers mountain biking, rafting, hiking, snorkeling and horseback riding, this island serves as the perfect retreat for any outdoor lover who seeks to do more than indolently worship sun gods on pristine sandy beaches.

The Dominican Republic is a tale of the highest of highs and lowest of lows. It hosts the highest point in the Caribbean--Pico Duarte-which, at 10,417 feet, reflects atypical characteristics like pine trees and below-freezing temperatures. Less than 70 miles away is the lowest point found anywhere in the Caribbean--the salty Enriquillo Lake at 144 feet below sea level.

Couple these extremes with the fact that 11 percent of the island's land mass is set aside in the form of 16 national parks replete with crystal clear mountain rivers and thundering waterfalls and it's no surprise that this country is becoming the Eco-tour capitol of the Caribbean.

Mountain Bikin' With Mama

My adventure began in Cabarete. Located on the northern shore of the aqua-tinted Atlantic Ocean, this coastal village is an internationally renowned haven for windsurfers. It also serves as a point of departure for numerous Eco-tours.

While I usually enjoy exploring new terrain on my own terms, hooking up with a local guide is almost a necessity in this country. With hundreds of miles of trails of breathtaking downhills and challenging singletrack, the untouched quality of the Dominican Republic makes it difficult to explore the backcountry unaccompanied.

I turned to Iguana Mama, the oldest licensed adventure tour operator in the Dominican Republic. The owner, American-born resident Tricia Thorndike de Suriel, is practically revered in Cabarete. In addition to setting up Eco guidelines within the national parks, Tricia donates 20 percent of Iguana Mama's income toward local schools and parks.

Our tour group was as varied as the terrain: a few hard-core Rocky Mountain bikers, a couple Scots who coined the mantra "When's the booze?" as motivation to keep pumping, and a few East coasters who had to be introduced to the "shocking" new technology of front-suspension on our Specialized mountain bikes (note: disclaimer on their lame pun).

Our motley crew started our trek at the summit of the Cibao valley in the interior of the Dominican Republic. We had a quick breakfast overlooking the valley, the largest and lushest in the Caribbean. This breadbasket is a staggering cacophony of glimmering emerald-green tobacco, rice, beans, pineapple, coffee and mango trees rooted in the deepest topsoil in the Caribbean.

It was against this incredible backdrop that we cruised down 3,000 feet of vertiginous drops and passed through impoverished villages of clapboard houses painted audacious shades of pink, purple, yellow and green. At each turn, the local children enthusiastically ran out to high five us.

I spotted several lemonade stands along the winding road. As a good Samaritan (and also a very overheated one), I figured I would contribute to the grass-roots economic community and buy a beverage. I dismounted my bike and approached one of the little entrepreneurs.

"How much?" I asked in my broken Spanish.

Dumbfounded, the boy looked at me and shook his head. Thinking it was my pathetic accent, I repeated myself, this time flashing my Dominican pesos. Still, the same response. I was confused. Did money not talk in this country?

Just as I was going to give this obstinate kid a few sales tips, one of the trip's guides came up behind me. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked me with laughter in his eyes.

"Trying to quench my thirst by contributing to the local economy."

"Well, I suggest you do it in another way--I don't think buying gas is going to satiate any kind of thirst. These jugs contain gas for motorists in this remote area, not drinks."

Ohhhh. I gave the little guy a bright smile and feigned that I knew what was going on the whole time. He flung me a what-a-stupid-American look. I smugly scoffed. Little did he know--I'm Canadian. . . .

Our trip was not limited to the primitive mountain roads. We shot down epic jungle singletracks that evolved from dry, rutted footpaths scratched by farmers walking back and forth among their villages. We eased over rocky ledges that plunged giddily into deep valleys, crossed Herculean rivers and gorged on delicious fruit at a roadside fruit stand (which did indeed prove to be veritable fruit).

Our reward after a long, sweaty, sun-scorched day was a tropical oasis--a beautiful pool of water at the end of the Jamao river. I peeled off my gear and dove in headfirst, shoes and all. We leisurely soaked our battered bodies and relished the rejuvenating solitude.

Rafting the Republic's Rapids

Our next destination was deep in the heart of the country. A beautiful mountain resort, Jarabacoa is to the Dominican Republic what Interlaken is to Switzerland--the country's gateway to mountains and whitewater. With river rafting, canyoning, trekking, tubing, paragliding, horseback riding and jeep safaris, this is the Dominican Republic's adventure playground.

Jarabacoa rests near the towering Pico Duarte and sits on the confluence of the turbulent rivers Jimenoa and Rio Yaque del Norte. The most significant river in the country, the Rio Yaque del Norte starts near Pico Duarte at an altitude of 8,514 feet and empties into the northwest coast.

We opted to take a bite out of this 184-mile beast and hooked up with Franz Aventuras, a rafting outfitter in Jarabacoa. We were provided with all the comforts of home on the water - wetsuits, helmets and lifejackets - and set loose on the class four rapids with our Dominican guide Lenny.

While certainly not my most extreme whitewater experience ever, the surroundings made this journey one of the most surreal. I had been warned not to expect much from the scenery due to Hurricane George's rage that was unleashed on the area. The deforested landscape I expected was very different from what I saw.

Dripping orchids festooned the path down this deep-set valley that glistened with white water. Velvet waterfalls swooned down the mountain slopes, spilling into the rushing river. Often shielded by the lush foliage strung along the deep canyon walls, these cascades almost magically appeared at the fingertips of the foliage. In this enchanting chasm, it seemed as though the plants were weeping.

I was entranced with this tropical paradise. I was not surprised when Lenny informed us that portions of Jurassic Park were filmed in this very river valley.

The rapids were extreme enough to give me a few quality surges of adrenaline. We were introduced to the Mother-in-Law rapid and then socked by Mike Tyson. We resurrected ourselves in the Cemetery, slithered through the Snake and relieved ourselves in the Toilet. Well, uh, kind of. We hopped out of the raft and cascaded down the gurgling porcelain bowl.

Hiking "Hispanolian" Style

If there is a rite of passage in the Dominican Republic, it is conquering Pico Duarte, the Caribbean's highest peak. Located in Parque Nacional Armando Bermudez-- the granddaddy of all the mountain parks--Pico Duarte appears as a jagged mass of summits. This strenuous 29-mile climb requires a commitment of at least two to four days, depending on conditions and routes. We had four hours.

Though I am known as an iron woman in my circles (which usually consists of a party of two: me and myself), I was barely able to take a chunk out of this spectacular hike. The 20-mile, four-wheel drive up the Yaque del Norte River valley was a large part of the adventure. We forded streams, skirted steeply terraced cropland and snaked through tiny villages where pendulous tree ferns swung over the fractured road.

The dirt road ended and trailhead began at the small village of La Ciénaga. We checked in at the park headquarters, paid a nominal fee for a permit and signed our lives and passports away to the park ranger. Because of numerous side trails, park regulations strongly suggest that hikers be accompanied by at least one park guide. Tropical downpours can turn the steep mountain trails into muddy rivers in a matter of minutes during rainy months of May and August through November. Temperatures also drop below freezing at night, so preparation is essential.

We began at over 4,000 feet. We plunged into the park's densely vegetated temperate zone, replete with paths of *cana brava*, or wild cane, and orchids. Giant fronds of waving palms grew side-by-side with bamboo and banyan trees whose root systems seemed to be above ground. These tropical trees gave way to alpine tree ferns and mountain pine canopies that dominated the skyline around 6,000 feet above sea level and continued to the crown of Pico Duarte.

A flock of birds with lime-green plumage and small white spots on their foreheads flittered in the trees as we ascended. I questioned Jackie, our Iguana Mama guide, about the name of this curious bird. While not sure of the exact name, she suspected it was a parrot of some sort.

"If all else fails, just put the word Hispanolian in front of the bird and chances are, you have half the formula," she jokingly said. "The Dominicans aren't very imaginative when it comes to classifying plants and animals and everything seems to start or end with Hispanolian."

I repeated my question to Aldolpho, our Dominican guide. "Oh, that is actually our national bird and it is very rare," he proudly announced. "We call it the *Hispanolian* parrot."

The Pulsation of the Dominican Republic

Despite my many exhilarating adventures in the Dominican Republic, possibly my most memorable was a tranquil moment in Jarabacoa where we set up in a very civilized camp at the beautiful Hotel Gran Jimenoa bordering the gurgling Jimenoa river.

At dusk, I made my way down to the riverbank and settled in for the performance of a lifetime. Directly across from my perch, the exuberant tones of the merengue resounded

from the bar. I listened, intrigued, as tourists and locals threw themselves into this fast and furious dance.

My attentions then turned to my natural setting. The clouds draped the upper slopes of the village, saturating the dense forest of verdant coconut palms. The water around me glistened with drops of light as I witnessed the birth of a slivered moon.

Two curious Dominican boys hesitatingly approached me. I eagerly welcomed their presence and before long, they choked out a few tunes for me on their rusty harmonica. As they played, the plaintive songs of birds bubbled to the surface in a chorus that continued full force as darkness settled upon the enigmatic gorge.

This strange but wonderful duet took my breath away--it was the witching hour of the Dominican Republic's thrush. Here was a place where two hearts beat as one—the frenetic merengue that pumped the cultural blood, mixed with an adventure playground that sets the pulse for anyone who chooses to venture beyond the beaten path.