

Hike, ride, swim, eat, talk on Dominican time

►DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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covery to Jimenez's girlfriend, Kylie Culver, a Californian working for Batey Relief Alliance.

When Culver heard I was coming for a school project, she introduced me to Marino and Katia José, who lead the area's nascent ecotourism movement. They offer tours to the Bahía de las Águilas (Bay of Eagles), Bahoruco mountain range, and El Mulito, a beauty spot located an hour upstream on the Pedernales River. Scientists and backpack travelers are among the guests at Doña Chava, their hostel. For \$500, including breakfast and dinner, its cool, dim rooms and garden shaded with fruit trees were my budget base for the month.

Founded in Katia's mother's house, Doña Chava feels like home. The whole family makes and serves the Criollo meals, the best food in town. For me, a typical day started with coffee on the patio or at one of the town's two bakeries. While roosters crowed and cows wandered onto the sidewalks, vendors opened their stands to sell spaghetti or chicken — Dominican breakfasts are hearty. Conchos, or motorcycle taxis, cruised by looking for riders, while a line formed at the polleria for fresh-killed chickens.

On my days off, I walked with a book and a picnic to the end of Avenida Duarte, where the beach, unfurling in grainy white sand and ultra-clear water, was often empty except for fishermen unloading their catches of lobster and rubio. A \$1.30 concho ride would have gotten me there faster, but walking guaranteed I would make discoveries: a house with a "se vende mabi" sign selling the homemade beverage of fruit, bark, and spices, or Dominicans like Eduard Claudic, who often walked with me, practicing his English.

At 8 p.m., people stepped out to the public square, sipping flasks of rum or papaya milkshakes, and moving to the disco, which shares space with a car wash, or to food stands dishing chimis, or burgers, and fried chicken and plantain chips (\$5). Haitian orphans waited in the shadows for leftovers, accepting them with a



PHOTOS BY PATRICIA BORNS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In southwestern Dominican Republic, anywhere along the route from Cabo Rojo to Bahía de las Águilas there are empty, endless-seeming stretches of beach and Caribbean Sea.

polite "messi," or thank you. Pedernales sits a mile from the border with Haiti and every Monday and Friday by government agreement, the cultures come together to trade at the market just before you cross into Haiti's Anse-à-Pitres.

Outside of town several attractions are best seen by rented 4x4 or on tour (\$65-\$114 per person). But you can have as enjoyable a time seeing the region by guagua, or motorcycle, on Route 44. Doña Chava's Marino Jose offered his Honda 99 cc for \$13.50 a day.

Seven miles from the hostel on 44, glimpses of garnet earth signal CaboRojo, or Red Cape, home of mining company ALCOA. Don't be deceived by the industrial look: The beaches here rival the world's best. A marked dirt road turns off to Bahía de las Águilas, part of Jaragua National Park. Along the way I ducked through the white mangroves — watching for tethered cows — onto blinding stretches of sand and sea.

At the bumpy road's end, for a \$1.50 entrance fee, you can hike a beautiful 1½-mile trail with columnar cacti towering overhead to the four-mile beach. Or you can hire a fishing skiff and breeze past coral heads the size of small buildings (\$8 split among six passengers). There are no facilities other than the seaside restaurant Rancho Tipico, whose fried whole snapper and cold Presidente make a happy ending to a beach day (\$8).

Two hours from the hostel,



Hanging out by a vegetable stall in the market in Paraíso, a coastal town whose name means "paradise" in Spanish.

Route 44 bends southeast to Oviedo, the park base for Laguna de Oviedo, where salt-crusted waters provide habitat for pink flamingos. My favorite part of the trip, which you can do by guagua, was getting there: ascending from the desert-like plains to the green Pedernales uplands, passing tomato fields, cow herds, and towns like Manuel Goya and Los Tres Charcos. In Oviedo, the owner of a corner comedor, a family-style restaurant, took the rubio I had bought that morning from a fisherman and fried it with green bananas for lunch.

On my return to Santo Domingo, I left a few days to explore Barahona, the ultimate 44 road trip, with limestone cliffs falling to the frothing Caribbean Sea. The landscape exudes a lushness hinting at the presence of the Bahoruco range, whose dry woods, massive evergreens, and tropical cloud forest form part of a

UNESCO biosphere reserve. Five rivers run from the mountains to pebble beaches, some with excellent surf breaks and protected swimming areas formed by inshore reefs.

The river towns of Los Patos and San Rafael are especially festive on weekends as families gather to swim in the freshwater inlets. I passed through another town, Paraíso, on a market day (Sunday and Wednesday), when the streets overflow with vendors selling everything from avocados to cellphones.

Second homes of politicians dot the Bahoruco hillsides. Businessman Polibio Schiffino's grandfather Polibio Díaz summered on his cattle ranch here. Today, his employees' descendants still work on the property, transformed by the third Schiffino generation into a luxury inn, Casa Bonita (\$205 a night), where I enjoyed my first hot shower and artisanal bread in weeks.

If you go . . .

Where to stay

Hostal Doña Chava

Calle Segunda No. 5

Pedernales

809-524-0332

www.donachava.com

Budget lodging with charm,

\$19-\$23 a night.

Casa Bonita

Km. 17 Carretera de la Costa

Bahoruco

www.casabonitadr.com

800-961-5133

The southwest's only luxe inn,

from \$204 a night.

Where to eat

D'Olio Mendez

Calle Antonio Duverge No. 9

Pedernales

809-524-0416

This small hotel has one of the

few sit-down restaurants,

\$3.50-\$12.

Siembras de Mi Tierra

Route 44

La Cienega, Barahona

829-560-3560

Call ahead for Dominican family

fare prepared by women from the La Cienega community.

What to do

Bahía de las Águilas

Las Cuevas, Pedernales

Spend the day on this beautiful

undeveloped beach. Admission

\$1.50; optional boat transfer

\$45 (can be split among six

passengers).

Mercado Fronterizo

Carretera a Anses-à-Pitres

Pedernales

Meet and bargain with Haitian

market women for produce. No

passport needed to enter Anse-

à-Pitres, Haiti. Mon and Fri, free.

Cachote

Calle Antonio Duverge No. 9

Pedernales

809-243-1190

www.ecotour-repdom.com

\$65 (six-person minimum)

Larimar mines

EcoTour Barahona

809-243-1190

www.ecotour-repdom.com

Tour the mines and buy stones

for less than half the shop price.

\$65 (6-person minimum)

On a day trip from here to Cachote (\$65), I jolted for 15 miles up the horrid Cienega Cachote road to 4,250 feet above sea level, hiking literally in the clouds. At the approach to the Canto del Jilguero nature center, an unpleasant smell came from the woods. When I mentioned this to Martiano Moreta Matos, an environmental leader who introduced sustainable farming to the Cachote coffee growers, he knew what I was talking about. "It's a medicinal plant believed to prevent diabetes," he said.

The community's 30 growers take turns guiding visitors on the hiking trails. "We used to cut down trees to grow coffee. Now we preserve them," Matos said.

Another day I went in search of larimar mines. A Dominican artisan, Miguel Méndez, is said to have discovered bits of semi-precious blue larimar on a Bahoruco beach in the 1970s. The 9-mile trip to the mines (\$65), on a road only nominally better than the Cienega Cachote, leads to Las Chupaderos, where 50 or more holes surround the pueblo. US

and European investors finance the drilling, while the miners are paid by the pound for the stones they unearth. Buyers come from as far as China and Japan, purchasing 500 pounds of larimar at a time for as little as \$50 a pound. It's dangerous work, as I saw touring a 75-foot mine shaft. The operations are entirely informal.

"You dig it, you own it," a foreman explained, showing us some stones. Rinsed, they looked like pieces of the Caribbean. How do they decide where to dig? "They just know," he said.

On my last day, leaving luxurious Casa Bonita to wait for the guagua back felt a little like being Cinderella after the ball. But on the bus, packed together with Dominicans sharing their cassava chips and rock songs, I felt fine.

Friends who have been to the Dominican resort coasts here say they are in no hurry to return. We had barely pulled out of Barohuco, and I didn't want to leave.

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Wild to adventure in old-time Belize

By Brian Irwin

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PLACENCIA, Belize — This is a hot spot for saltwater fly-fishing. While Belize's northern islands host polished lodges with gourmet meals and groomed bartenders, those to the south remain wild paradises where the fish are plentiful.

Placencia sits on the southern tip of the Placencia Peninsula, a 20-mile-long spit of land with a creamy-green lagoon on the west and the Caribbean Sea on the east. It holds a string of villages with names like Maya Beach and Seine Bight, and still-rustic throngs of shacks that provide a glimpse of what the peninsula must have been like until 1991, when power, phone, cable, and pavement were brought in. Before then homes were lighted by hurricane lamps, and families fished for tuna and lobster and lived in a bartering society where life was simple.

The peninsula has changed dramatically. Cozy cabanas line the beach, inexpensive but refined restaurants dot the sidewalks in town, and large vacation homes are starting to pop up. It's an area recently discovered by a growing number of expatriates, some with deep pockets. On the northern end monstrous mansions are being erected and a casino will soon open. This paradise, whose amenities are still in their infancy, is on the verge of a tourism explosion.

But offshore, none of that is happening.

Eight miles off the southeastern coast Julian Cabral, 45, operates Whipray Caye Lodge, a rustic set of drafty bungalows that sit on this private, three-

acre isle. Cabral is revered as one of the best saltwater fly-fishing guides in the area for the pursuit of tarpon, bonefish, and permit, three of angling's most sought-after gamefish.

Life is slow here but the fishing action is not. Shallow "flats," patches of ocean that are only shin-deep, run thick with permit. Cabral seemed to have X-ray vision, peering through the glare to direct me where to cast as he pushed a battered wooden boat through the water with a long pole. "Tail, three-o'clock," he'd say. I'd cast, feel a bump, a tug on the line, then nothing. Although we fished all day, they weren't feeding and we came up with only one. Still, I had one of the best days I've ever had fishing. Cabral reminded me, "That's why they call it fishing and not catching."

Belize is a diverse country, mostly inhabited by Garifuna, Creole, and Maya people. The Garifuna stemmed from Europeans, blending their genes with West Africans who were brought here as slaves. Creoles have "Indian" blood in them, and the Maya folk date to one of the world's great cultures, a kingdom that ruled this part of the world for a few thousand years. Belize holds the highest concentration of Maya ruins in Central America, none more spectacular than the giant temples of Xunantunich.

Xunantunich rests on the border with Guatemala in western Belize. We approached the ruin by crossing the Mopan River on a hand-cranked, single-car ferry. A short walk through the jungle opens to a breathtaking pyramid. First explored in 1890, the 130-foot-high stone structure was the



In Belize, the author and his snook, one of the strongest fighting saltwater gamefish and prized by fly-fishermen.

epicenter of this civilization, one of the largest Mayan cities in the region. Viewed from the top of the main temple, the clouds seem to stick to the walls of the king's palace, surrounding the peasant dwellings and forested hills that ripple out from the temple's courtyard. Aerial ultrasound studies revealed that under this dense jungle, an entire city lies buried, with buildings in a 2-mile radius from its center.

Belize's thick jungle is a world shrouded in mystery. Few thoroughfares pass through it; in fact there are only three major roads in the country, none with numbers or exits. Most of the other roads are dirt. The Hummingbird Highway, never more than one lane in each direction, slices Belize and its jungle, in two. In the center an ecotourism industry is evolving.

There are few places to stay or visit in the sparsely populated center, yet the area holds spectacular natural discoveries. Misty waterfalls leak through the trees, crystal-clear rivers flow in and out of 3-mile-long limestone caves, their caverns rich in artifacts left by the Maya

who revered the spaces as the underworld. We explored the twisted tunnels, lined with stalactites and swirling bats, with a local guide.

To approach the caves, we boarded an old school bus that departed from Caves Branch, a luxurious ecolodge. Driving through mango and dragon-fruit groves, we eventually forded a river, hiked to the caves' opening, and waded upstream. Terra-cotta pots and human bones ringed ceremonial fire pits. After exploring the slick formations we dropped into the inner tubes we carried, and by headlamp floated out of the caves and back into the jungle. Albino catfish and colorful freshwater fish glided beneath our dangling legs.

Caves Branch is an oasis with the country's largest collection of orchids and a crisp pool that rests among the huge trees of the forest canopy. A series of treehouses, ranging from simple to expansive 1,200-square-foot suites with hot tubs on their roofs and tiled, outdoor showers reach up into the dense system of trees, all accessed by an elevated system of boardwalks.

If you go . . .

Lodging:Do you want to stay

in the jungle or on the beach?

Nothing beats Ian Anderson's

Caves Branch Resort, on the

Hummingbird Highway. The

jungle eco-lodge offers rooms,

bungalows, impressive tree

houses, and all-inclusive options.

Rates start at \$146 per night

up to \$506 for treehouse rooms.

Packages with tours can be

arranged.

866-357-2698, www.cavesbranch.com

On the beach, the Maya Beach

Hotel offers quiet, comfortable

accommodations, an infinity

pool, tiki bar on the beach, and

the best brunch on the Placencia

Peninsula. Rates \$69-\$139 per

night depending on room and

time of visit.

011-501-520-8040, www.maya-beachhotel.com

Fishing: WhiprayCaye Lodge

and Julian Cabral, the owner

and guide. Three-day packages

including transfers, lodging,

meals, and fishing start at

\$2,155. Day guiding \$350.

011-501-0610-1068, www.whipraycayelodge.com

Adventure activities:Caves

Branch is your go-to for eco-

tours, from waterfall rappelling

to cave tubing, from zip line

rides to jungle hikes. It also of-

fers tours of the Maya ruins.

River cave expedition \$85. Com-

bo tours including zip line rides

and cave tubing \$155.

Information: 800-624-0686,

www.travelbelize.com

As plush as Caves Branch is, most visitors come to explore the adventure opportunities that await. Waterfall rappelling and jungle canopy zip line tours are some of the more popular forays. We tried the latter, walking up into the hills and riding down thick steel cables, suspended by pulleys and harnesses, at over 40 miles an hour. One zip line, the longest in Belize, was well over a half-mile.

But I had come to Belize to catch fish. So the night before we left, I called Cabral and asked if he could guide me from 4-8 the next morning. His generator had exploded the day before, so he referred me to his nephew Dermain Shivers, who knows the lagoon, where tarpon, a prehistoric fish that looks like a 100-pound minnow, gather in droves just before sunrise.

Shivers picked me up at the dock in Placencia in the predawn hours and we cruised into a milky bay ringed with mangrove trees. There, under the glow of the moon, flashes of sil-

ver blinked just under the surface and the water roiled with feeding fish.

I peeled out line and cast a popper, a fly that looks like a decorated cork, into the pod. In a thrash of whitewater a fish was on. Line peeled out, it jumped once high in the air, spit the fly, and was off. For the next two hours I'd cast, tease my fly across the water, and yard hard on the plate-like mouths of one of the world's best gamefish, landing about 10 percent, a respectable figure for this elusive fish.

When the water settled, Shivers pointed. "Ray," he said. Snook, one of the most exciting fish to catch on fly, tend to rest in turbid water, often on the backs of stingrays. I cast to the ray's shadow, popping the lure across the surface. Like a triggered landmine, the water erupted, the ray bolted, and thick cord screamed from my fly reel, spinning salty water into the rays of the rising sun.

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