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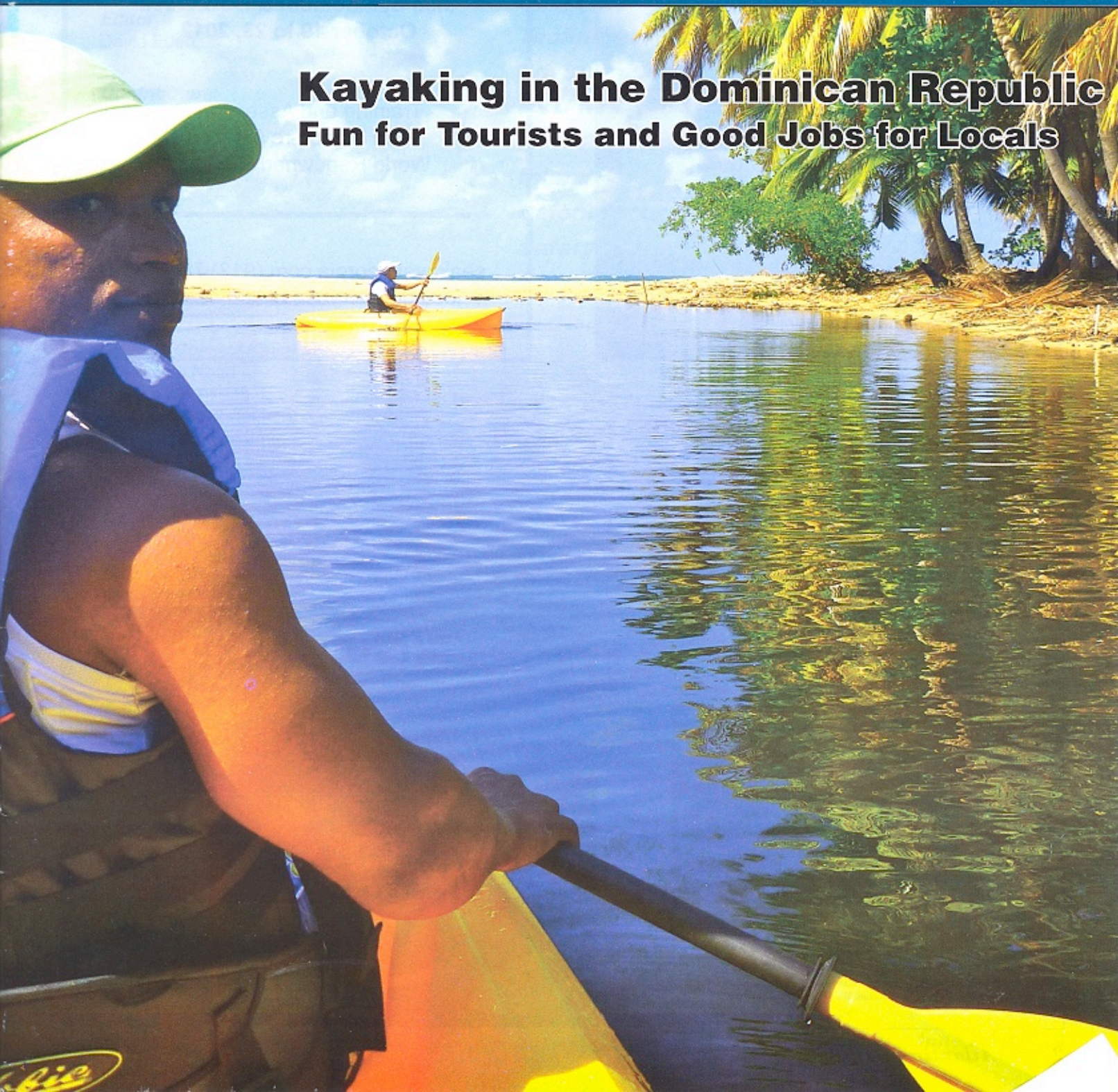
June 2012 Volume 21, No. 3

www.atlanticcoastalkayaker.com

\$3.00

Kayaking in the Dominican Republic

Fun for Tourists and Good Jobs for Locals



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Fun for Tourists and Good Jobs for Locals

Article by Jerry Wylie and Jerry Bauer



Guide training at La Caleta. Photo by Jerry Bauer.

The Dominican Republic, covering the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, is famous for its all-inclusive resorts and miles of idyllic white sand beaches where millions of tourists flock to the “sun, sand, and sea” each year. But what about those looking for a different experience away from the crowd, like soft adventure with a little exercise and some wildlife viewing? Well, we’ve investigated kayak tourism and how it can help protect biodiversity in the Dominican Republic, and here are five areas worth visiting.

An Urban Escape at La Caleta

The tiny cove and beach was full of local kids splashing in the shallows, swimming or showing off by jumping from the low cliffs that flank the beach. We carried our kayaks from under the shady trees, picked our way through colorfully painted wooden

fishing boats (called yolas) and hand-made crab traps stored on the beach, and waded into the sun-drenched, turquoise-blue water of the Caribbean. With no wind, waves, or clouds the midday sun easily penetrated the calm crystal-clear water and reflected off the sandy bottom, making our kayaks look like they were suspended in air.

We were just 12 miles east of the capital city of Santo Domingo, in Parque Nacional Submarino La Caleta, the smallest park in the Dominican Republic and the closest place to the city to access the water. Established in 1986 to protect the coral reef and prehistoric Taino archeological remains, it has more than 3 miles of rocky coastline with generally calm and clear tropical waters that attract scuba divers from the city as well as local bathers.

We had visited several times before,

hiking the rugged shoreline of uplifted coral limestone, inspecting the park’s trails and infrastructure, and developing plans for interpretive signs. But our job now was to evaluate kayaking.

Earlier we had taken a powerboat to the southeast, so today we went west to explore the highly eroded shoreline with its overhanging cliffs and hidden, rocky coves. There were patches of coral clearly visible 10 feet below us, full of colorful fish, as well as sandy patches and areas with sponges and sea grass. Since there are few places to access the water, on a calm day kayak snorkeling will be the best option for non-divers to see the park’s shallow waters and beautiful reef.

Continuing down the coast we were quickly reminded we were in an urban setting. We passed a small, historic cemetery

perched at the edge of the cliff; the air was filled with the hum of traffic along the coastal highway and the roar of jets departing the international airport bordering the park on the east; and in the distance we could see the outline of city skyscrapers. But its proximity to Santo Domingo is a big plus. You can grab a taxi in the morning and be there in 20 minutes, paddle for a couple of hours, and be back in town for a late lunch.

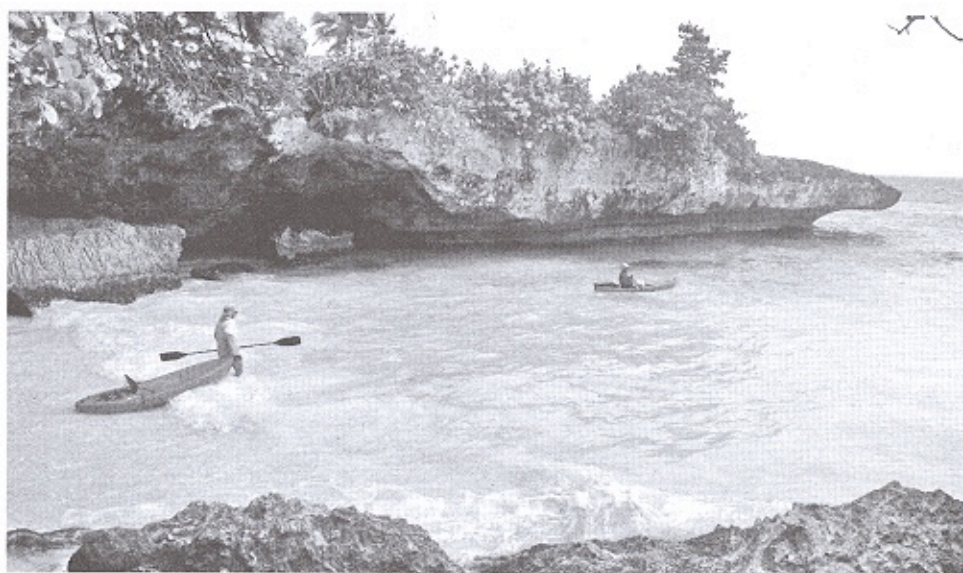
Despite all these urban reminders, we were pleasantly surprised when we got to the turn-around point a mile and a half from the beach. Here we discovered a beautiful little bay about 150 feet long and 60 feet wide and Swallow Cave (Cueva Golondrinas), a large overhang sheltering a tiny beach not 100 feet from the highway.

Standing here looking out at the empty ocean, with the rising wind and sound of the waves completely masking the traffic noise, we could imagine we were alone on this coast a little more than 500 years ago when Christopher Columbus sailed by, "discovering" the island, startling the local Taino residents, and starting the Americas on the road to "development."

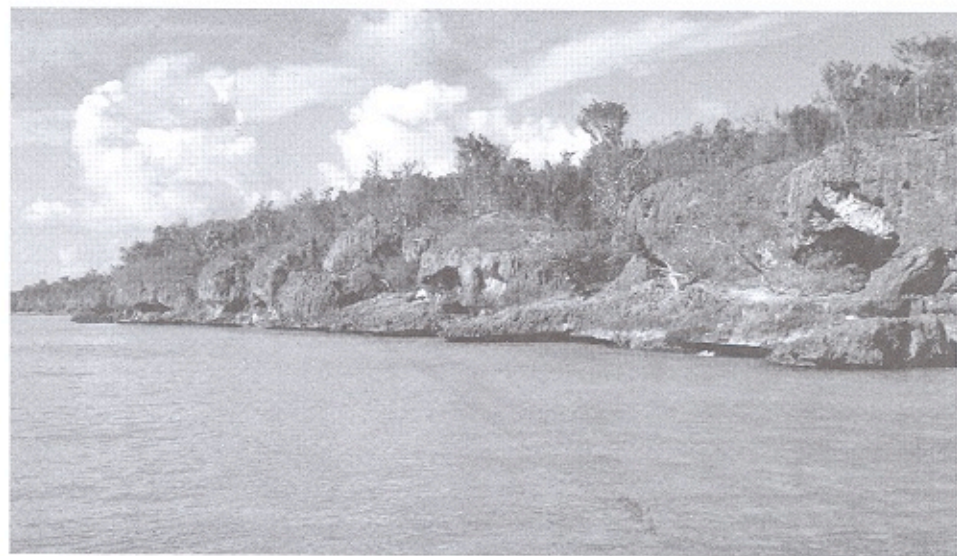
But we didn't have time to ponder the Admiral's effect on the New World. The weather was changing and we needed to get back before it got too rough. The wind was only about 15 mph, but the waves were reflecting off the cliff, creating very confused seas. Our kayaks were short 8-footers, which are slow boats even in good conditions, but we made it back with a little effort.

This was a good lesson to keep a careful eye on the weather. Paddling conditions here can deteriorate quickly when the wind picks up and the only convenient points of egress are the main beach and at Swallow Cave. Other "cons" are the deteriorated park facilities (currently being upgraded) and lack of interpretive signs or orientation information (plans have been completed but signs are not yet installed). Planned improvements to park infrastructure include showers and a café.

The park's strong points for kayak



Leaving Swallow Cave. Photo by Jerry Wylie, Connecticut Coastal Kayaking.



Cliffs on the west coast of Parque del Este. Photo by Jerry Wylie.

tourism include an attractive coastline, a coral reef full of tropical fish, easy access, and its proximity to the city. Visitors can snorkel, swim, relax in the shady park, and visit the historic cemetery with its colorfully painted tombs.

The West Coast, National Park of the East

Near La Romana on the island's southeastern corner is a large, wild peninsula that, together with Saona Island, forms one of the country's largest parks: Parque Nacional del Este. This is an area of tropical dry-forests, rugged karst limestone topography

with caves and underground springs, sandy beaches, and quiet mangrove lagoons full of birds, perfect for nature-lovers and kayakers.

If you're looking for solitude, be aware that the beaches along the southern shore of Saona Island attract more visitors than any other park in the country, about 600,000 per year. Tourists board a fleet of powerboats and catamarans at the small fishing village of Bayahibe to make the 18-mile crossing every day. The coast around Bayahibe is home to large all-inclusive resorts, whereas the small fishing village of Boca de Yuma on the east side of the park has few visi-



Kayaks are the best way to explore the mangrove-girt Laguna Bavaro. Photo by Jerry Bauer.



Mangrove channels and bird nests at Laguna Bavaro. Photo by Jerry Wylie.

tors. Rustic Mano Juan on the south shore of Saona Island does receive day-trippers, but has limited facilities for guests.

The eastern side of the park, with its high cliffs, strong winds, and crashing waves, is remote and uninviting. However, the tranquil western coast between Bayahibe and Saona Island is well suited for

kayaking, not only because it is protected from the prevailing winds, but because of its attractive topography and reef. It has sections of uplifted coral limestone forming interesting ledges and cliffs, as well as sandy beaches backed by a tropical dry forest or the remnants of coconut plantations.

Other than two small park offices and

several trails leading to large caves open to the public, there is very little evidence of civilization along this shoreline. Dolphins and even the occasional whale can be spotted here, and at the south end of the peninsula there are shallow lagoons cloaked with thick mangroves where you are completely alone except for birds and the occasional shy manatee.

It is about three miles from Bayahibe to the beginning of the park, and from there slightly more than 10 miles to the tip of the peninsula. This distance would require an overnight camp, or you can inquire at local dive shops to transport kayaks down the coast for a one-way trip back. But if you're staying at one of the resorts near the park, the easiest option is to rent a kayak there and do a three or four-mile trip down the coast, stop for a swim and lunch, and paddle back.

Don't forget to bring your snorkel mask, waterproof sunscreen, and lots of water and stop at the park office next to the bus parking lot in Bayahibe to get oriented and pay your park entrance fee. And while you're in the area, take a few hours to visit the interpretive nature trail, caverns and underground springs at nearby Padre Nuestro.

Behind the Green Curtain at Laguna Bavaro

Punta Cana, on the east end of the island, receives more international tourists than any other part of the Dominican Republic. Many of these stay at the all-inclusive resorts near the small town of Cabeza de Toro, where they enjoy golf courses and miles of beautiful beaches crowded with sun-worshippers and bathers. But only steps away is another world hidden behind a dense green curtain of mangrove forest, a small natural lake full of water birds, fish and turtles, Laguna Bavaro Wildlife Refuge (Refugio Vida Silvestre Laguna Bavaro y El Caletón), and the only way to really experience it is by kayak.

This charming little lake is one-and-a-half miles by three-quarters of a mile wide and 8 feet deep or less. The eastern corner near town and resorts is the most interesting and also has a new visitor center and gift shop. Two-hour guided kayak tours can provide a relaxing tour of the intimate man-

grove channels and coves at this end of the lake.

In addition to its close proximity to resorts, the advantages of visiting Laguna Bavaro include its pristine mangrove forest, abundant wildlife, fish-viewing of both freshwater and saltwater species (this lake has layers of both fresh and brackish water), a lack of trash, and few biting insects. However, this unique aquatic habitat offers no swimming opportunities because of its shallow depth and floating aquatic vegetation.

Wildlife viewing here is excellent. You can see lots of egrets and herons hunting along the shore, as well as numerous small diving ducks in the room-sized "ponds" at the ends of many bays only accessible by narrow tunnels through the mangroves. Large freshwater turtles sun themselves on logs, and when the sun is directly overhead, fish nests are visible in the shallow water, each carefully guarded by a protective tilapia. There are floating bird nests, bird nests that looked like woven baskets hanging in the trees, and in the main body of the lake you can occasionally see larger saltwater fish hunting in the shallow waters.

A longer tour to visit the west end of the lake is also possible, a round trip of about five miles and taking at least three hours. However, windy conditions can sometimes make this difficult because it is more open and less protected from the prevailing on-shore winds than the east end.

Laguna Limón and the Beach-of-Your-Dreams

Located along the sleepy northeastern corner of the island and 12 miles east of Miches is a little-visited section of the coast with a stunning beach and the rustic village of Los Guineos. Here, local fishermen in small wooden dories work the waters of Laguna Limón, a pretty freshwater lake about one and one-half by two miles in length, part of the Laguna Limón and Redonda Wildlife Refuge (Refugio Vida Silvestre Laguna Limón y Redonda).

Although the roads are in poor condition, especially after it rains, this area has much to offer. The lake is situated in a bu-



The fabulous beach at Laguna Limón. Photo by Jerry Wylie.



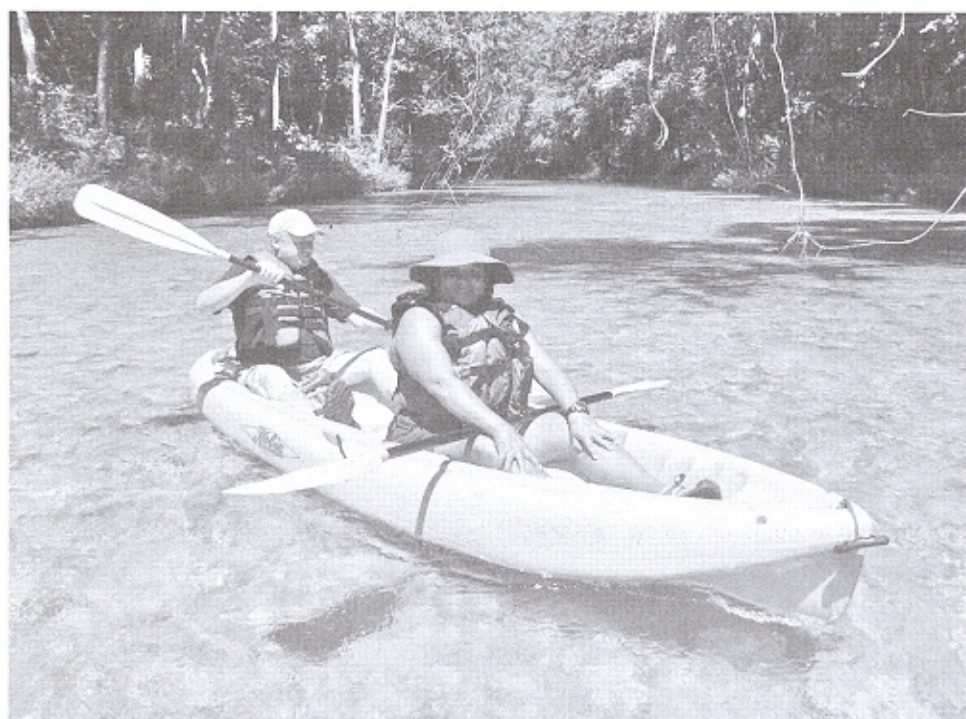
A traditional fisherman in Laguna Limón. Photo by Jerry Wylie.

colic rural setting backed by lush, green mountains, there is lots of viewable wildlife such as birds, fish, and turtles, the local fishermen are interesting, and you can paddle to one of the most attractive, undeveloped beaches on the island. In addition, there are two modest hotels near the lake and beach where independent travelers can find inexpensive food and lodging.

Although kayaking is just getting started here, all the pieces are in place. The community is working with a US Peace Corps volunteer, USAID, and Columbia University to develop a small-scale kayak

program that they hope will generate local income and help protect the lake from over-fishing. We visited in early 2012 to evaluate the area's tourism potential and to begin training with three new sit-on-top kayakers.

Although the refuge office is on the southern shore closest to the village, the most interesting part of lake is the northern side. Here we found several small islands, shady mangroves, hidden coves full of waterfowl, and a 400-yard long man-made canal connecting the lake to the beach. Some of the smaller islands were actually floating mats of reeds and water plants that move



Jerry and Bienvenida Bauer on a gentle section of the Río Jamao. Photo by Jerry Wylie.

from place to place depending on the wind.

It was fascinating to watch the fishermen working with their small wooden boats. After setting a long line of netting near the shore, one would stand in the boat and flail the water with a long stick to drive fish into the net while his partner slowly paddled parallel to it. They also used small woven baskets in the shallows, each with a plastic bottle float, to capture crabs.

By far the most interesting attraction is the wild beach along the entire northern side of the lake. Except for a few small rustic structures used as rest stops for horse and ox-cart tours, this section of the coastline is pristine and offers miles of solitary beachcombing and spectacular views of the sea and nearby mountains.

The priorities for kayak tourism here are to purchase more boats, continue training local guides, and develop a two or three-hour tour route from 2.5 to 4 miles in length. Because of the size of the lake and the generally strong on-shore winds, tours across the lake may not be feasible from the park office. This, plus the location of the beach and other attractions, will probably require tours to start on the north side of the lake. Alternate waterways are being

explored and cleared to expand paddling opportunities and make a loop tour through the mangroves.

Refreshing Río Jamao in the Mountains

If you're on the northern coast near Puerto Plata and looking for something different, consider visiting one of the interior rivers in the mountains for a day trip or even an overnight stay. One great option is the Sereno de la Montaña ecolodge and Río Jamao 21 miles south of Cabarete and 21 miles north of Moca. Depending on the weather and road conditions, this is a 45-minute drive from each town (slightly more than a 3-hour drive from Santo Domingo.)

Although somewhat remote and requiring a 4x4 vehicle, it has many advantages. There are no crowds, the river runs through a very scenic canyon cloaked with thick forests, and has long, gentle stretches with deep pools. Kayaking here is more "water play" than serious paddling, at least for now. But the beautiful setting, refreshingly cool water, and comfortable temperatures make it well worthwhile, especially for travelers with kids.

The nearby lodge has just recently opened and offers basic lodging and food,

as well as guides, and hiking trails. They are just now starting river sports activities and we anticipate this will soon be offered as a stop on the popular ATV tours from the coast.

Planned water recreation here includes floating gentle areas of the Río Jamao with kayaks and float tubes. There are two areas where kayaking is possible: the 400-yard section upstream from the resort's proposed camping area and a large quiet pool 400 yards downstream. You can paddle upstream under a shady canopy of tall trees and back in an easy 20 minutes, then slide down the gentle rapids into the deep pool at La Playita, where you can relax and explore the ferns and flowers growing out of the cliff that towers overhead. Don't miss the freshwater shrimp that live under rocks.

To return to the starting point, boats can be pulled up through the rapids or carried back along the trail. In the future, longer kayak trips 3.5 miles downstream may be possible with suitable water levels. However, this will require ferrying boats and people back to the lodge in 4x4 vehicles. In either case, this would well be worth the effort.

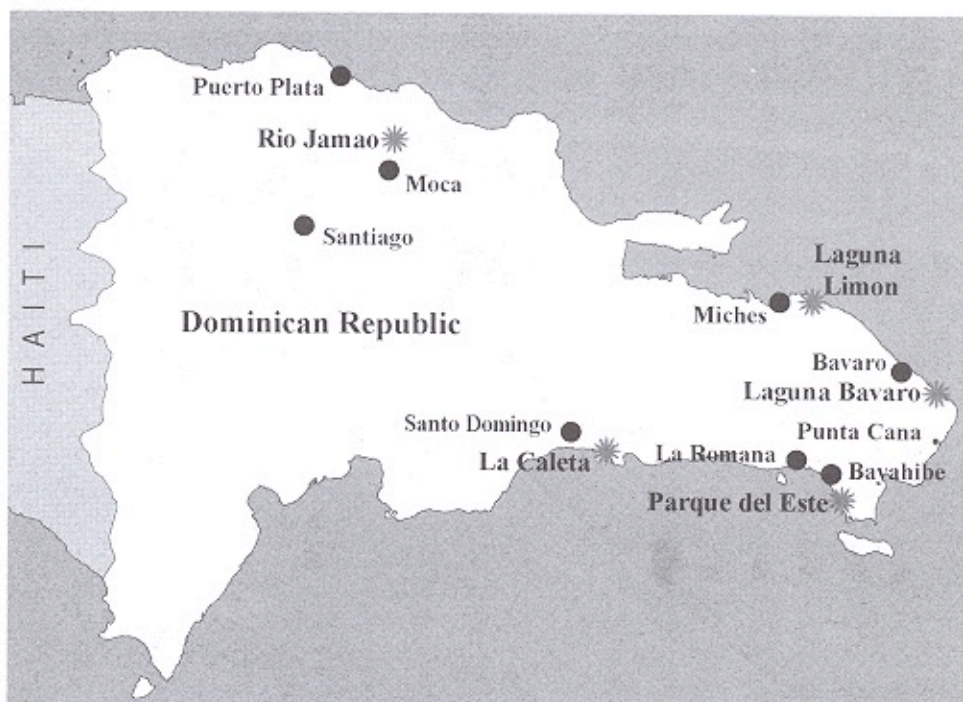
What We've Learned About Kayaking in the Dominican Republic

After traveling extensively and working on sustainable tourism in the Dominican Republic for the past four years, here's what we can say about kayaking. First, it is not the primary reason to visit...at least not yet. There are too many other wonderful distractions and no outfitters who specialize in serious flat water kayaking.

But as these five areas show, kayaking is a good secondary attraction; there are plenty of opportunities to enjoy a day or half-day of kayaking during your visit and each area has something special to offer. At La Caleta you can do a quick tour or kayak/snorkel close to the city; Parque Nacional del Este offers many miles of undeveloped coastline; Laguna Bavaro has bird- and fish-watching; Laguna Limón has traditional fishermen and a stunning beach; and Río Jamao gives you a chance to cool off and relax in a mountain setting.

These will be primarily short tours in sit-on-top kayaks that are well suited for casual paddling in the tropics but harder to paddle long distances. All five areas offer what we would call a "recreational" experience. However, you have a chance to add a little "educational" element learning about the lush mangrove ecosystem at Laguna Bavaro; at Rio Jamao you could also get a dose of "adventure" in the gentle rapids; and at Parque del Este's remote coastline you might find a little "wilderness."

Keep in mind, however, that kayaking tourism here is in its infancy, so you must be patient and flexible. The other disclaimer is we haven't examined all the good paddling water, especially the relatively untouched southwestern coast which, based on one quick trip, looks very promising. So this is a just a preliminary report and you can keep track of future results through the internet (see below).



What Makes Tourism Sustainable?

For tourism to be sustainable it must provide benefits for the environment, the local community, and for visitors, and benefits in one sector must also contribute to the other two. A healthy park provides the attractions that tourists come to see and the resources upon which the community depends, the community provides the guides, park guards and infrastructure needed to protect the park and support tourism, and the tourists provide the financial support for both the community and the park to function. You can't have one without the other two.

As you're enjoying a kayak trip at one of these special places, keep in mind how you are contributing to biodiversity conservation and supporting the local community. The environmental benefits of your visit may include entrance fees to support the management of each area, adopting low-impact Leave-No-Trace behavior, volunteering, and donating to local conservation funds. Kayak ecotourism also ensures biodiversity by providing alternatives to traditional livelihoods to reduce over-fishing, excess hunting, and resource extraction. Community benefits come from the jobs supported by your trip, the diversification of the local economy, and preservation of local crafts and traditions involved in tourism.

Last but not least, you benefit from positive experiences, starting with fun and recreation, but also including learning something about the area and making emotional connections that enhance you as an individual.

For More Information

For more detailed information, maps and photographs, you can download our reports from the USAID Natural Resources Management and Development Portal (<http://rmportal.net>). This will be a good source of updated information as we continue work in these areas. You can also Google the reports directly by using combinations of "Wylie and Bauer" plus "kayaking" and the name of the area that interests you. The one exception is Parque Nacional del Este where, although there are several reports on land-based recreation and signage, we have not yet done a formal kayak assessment.

Local Contacts

General Contact: Yira Vermenton, Dominican Treasures, 809-872-0022, yira@turismocdct.org (www.dominicantreasures.com)

La Caleta: Ruben Torres, Reef Check Dominican Republic Director, Ruben@reef-check.org, 809-227-4409.

Laguna Bavaro - Juan Carlos Sánchez,

Executive Director the Altagracia Tourism Cluster, fesonap@yahoo.com, 809-552-0105. Also the Altagracia Tourism Cluster, 809-455-1250, www.clusterlaaltagracia.com.

Laguna Limón: Justino (Tati) Perez, rancholagunaLimón@hotmail.com, 809.980.5232 (Spanish only) or Turner Hirsh (tmhirsh@gmail.com) tel 849-707-4993

Río Jamao: Sereno de la Montaña Ec lodge, www.serenodelamontaña.com, serenomon-tana@gmail.com, 809-424-7070.

Credits

These five areas, originally part of the Dominican Sustainable Tourism Alliance network are now being coordinated by a consortium as part of the Dominican Treasures program (www.dominicantreasures.com).

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