

Discovering Road's End

Trekking in the Dominican Republic

By Lisa K. Harris

Walking the rickety dock, weather-worn boards creaking with each step, I eye the lancha tied alongside and hope the small boat and its outboard motor are better maintained than the wharf. The only boat tied to Parque Nacional Jaragua's only dock is our one chance to explore the area. I'll bail my way across Laguna Oviedo if I have to.

My two daughters and I have driven to the Dominican Republic's southern tip, near the Haiti border, to see rhinoceros iguanas. I had hoped to spot crocodiles too, but we are out of luck, according to guide Manueto. Lyda sighs with relief. She's seen enough crocodiles on our past adventures and doesn't care for them. Much younger Ava, however, feels cheated after my description of how many teeth they have and how fast they move.

"Stop complaining," Lyda shouts above the roar of the motor as we scoot across the water. "I'm sure Mom will get too close to some other animal."

In a rare moment, I agree with my teenage daughter. That is the plan – get up close to the Park's wildlife, as well as explore other wild areas in the Dominican Republic.

Baoruca Peninsula

To me, traveling is journeying to road's end. And Laguna Oviedo on the Baoruca Peninsula is just that.

Few visitors rough the two-day drive to Laguna Oviedo from Santa Domingo, the country's capital. Short on palm trees and white sand beaches typical of the Caribbean, the Baoruca Peninsula is arid, with cacti, thorny scrub, and scrawny trees. The shore is rocky, and where there is a beach, the sand is coarse and gritty.

The roads are narrow, poorly signed, and lacking what guidebooks refer to as "tourist amenities." Dogs, chickens, horses, and cattle herds use the roads as frequently as weaving motorcyclists, trucks brimming with plantain stalks, and vans laden with people. Everything motorized zips as fast as it can, paying no heed to lane markers or merging traffic.

God forbid one needed to pull over, as there are no shoulders, only water-filled ditches several feet below road's grade. An overestimated swerve away from an oncoming passing truck would mean an upended car with a broken axle.

We pick up Manueto in Paraiso, a speck of a town on the coast, about an hour's drive south of our 12-room inn in Barahona, the region's main urban area. We had arranged for Manueto's guiding service through our innkeeper. I'd requested someone who would take us to the "back waters." As a biologist, I have no interest in being shown tourist traps. I shouldn't have worried; there are

no tourist traps because there are no tourists. We three girls are it.

I've had enough of the local traffic, so I'm glad when Manueto waves us down from the curb next to a cafeteria, a shanty selling fresh mangos, Cokes, and roasted chicken. I want to watch the trees heavy with fruit blur past from the passenger seat, but Manueto arrived on his motorcycle and expects me to drive.

With his English so-so, I find it easier to speak Spanish. Founded by Columbus, the Dominican Republic has retained its



Jimenoa One Falls in the mountains outside of Jarabocoa, Dominican Republic.
Lyda Harris Photo

Hispanic language and culture. Manueto directs me farther south along the coast-hugging road to Parque Nacional Jaragua. Although early, it's hot and humid, with a hazy sky. Looking at dust-covered plants and ladies standing in their doorways swishing fans, an air-clearing soaking is long overdue.

Another hour of avoiding pigs and sugarcane trucks, we arrive at the park's entrance. Unfolding from my hunched over full-alert stance, I feel like the carnival's bumper-cart ride finally ended.

Standing at the end of the rickety pier in the country's largest park, the only sign of life are dots of pink flamingos and children who come to watch us ungracefully scramble into the boat. The smell of the greenish-yellow lake's water hints of rotten eggs. Three-times saltier than the close-by Caribbean Sea, Laguna Oviedo's water is high in sulfur. Birds, iguanas, and pictographs are the park's draw. Endemic to the island of Hispanola's arid south, rhinoceros iguanas are a threatened species. A source of food in Haiti, there are only a few pockets where the lizard thrives. Parque Nacional Jaragua is one.

On the slow ride to the cays, we spot ibis, frigate birds, and pelicans. We land on Isla Iguana, one of the lake's larger islands. Tying up to a post in the water, we balance our way across a single warped board until we jump onto land. As if expecting us, rhinoceros iguanas stand beneath shrubby black mangroves. The steel-gray lizards, four feet long, lumber towards us.

"See, what I mean," Lyda jabs Ava in the shoulder. "Wildlife."

Manueto plucks white blossoms from a mangrove and tosses them onto the course sand. The iguanas scurry to the pile and a fight erupts – two pushing at each other, their mouths agape as each tries to control access to the main pile. A third gulps outlying buds.

Opportunistic eaters, they are herbivores. I scan the surrounding mangroves. Blossoms grow only on the tops, outside the lizard's reach. The iguanas have stripped the lower stems bare of flowers and leathery leaves.

We follow Manueto along a narrow trail, twining between massive sharp-edged bromeliads, cacti, and squat trees. Taller frangipani trees, dripping with blossoms, dot the trail, their scent like roses. Our goal is a wooden lookout tower. An iguana lounges on the bottom step, its "horn," prominently raised into the sun. It barely turns sideways as we walk by. From the lookout, we spot flamingo flocks plying the shallow waters for lunch, their pink bodies like sugar-coated gumdrops in the brackish waters.

Back in the boat, we head toward the flock and another island. Veering right as we approach land, so as not to disturb the birds, we moor in very shallow waters. Wading to shore, our feet in muck, I'm glad there haven't

been any recent crocodile sightings. The roar of the ocean's waves hitting the opposite side of the cay booms as we drag ashore.

Following a narrow trail, we hike across the thin island. The vegetation is thicker here than on Iguana Island, and the farther we travel inland the denser the mosquitoes. The trail leads us to an overhanging rock, to what appears to have been the island's edge at one time. Inside is a shallow cave with pictographs. Curly-cues and circles had been chiseled into the limestone by the Taíno, a native tribe that pre-dated Columbus' voyage. I try to make out the design, tracing the dents with my fingers, but a dense mosquito cloud chases me off. We hustle back to the lagoon, with Lyda leading, the dank-smelling waters a relief for their absence of biting insects.

In the car, Lyda inventories her bites: 111. None of us will complain further about choking down those whopper-sized, bitter-tasting anti-malarial pills I brought along.

"I'm hungry," Ava chirps from the back seat. The outdoor chairs at Oviedo's one cafeteria stand empty. Guessing the food isn't ready or any good, I turn to Manueto. That's one benefit to hiring a local guide: they know the best places to eat. In this case, food was another fifty miles further west.

The closer we travel toward Haiti, the worse the road conditions become – potholes, ruts, eroded sides. There are fewer cars but more frequent speed



Scooting across Parque Nacional Jaragua's Laguna Olviedo in search of iguanas.
Lisa K. Harris Photo