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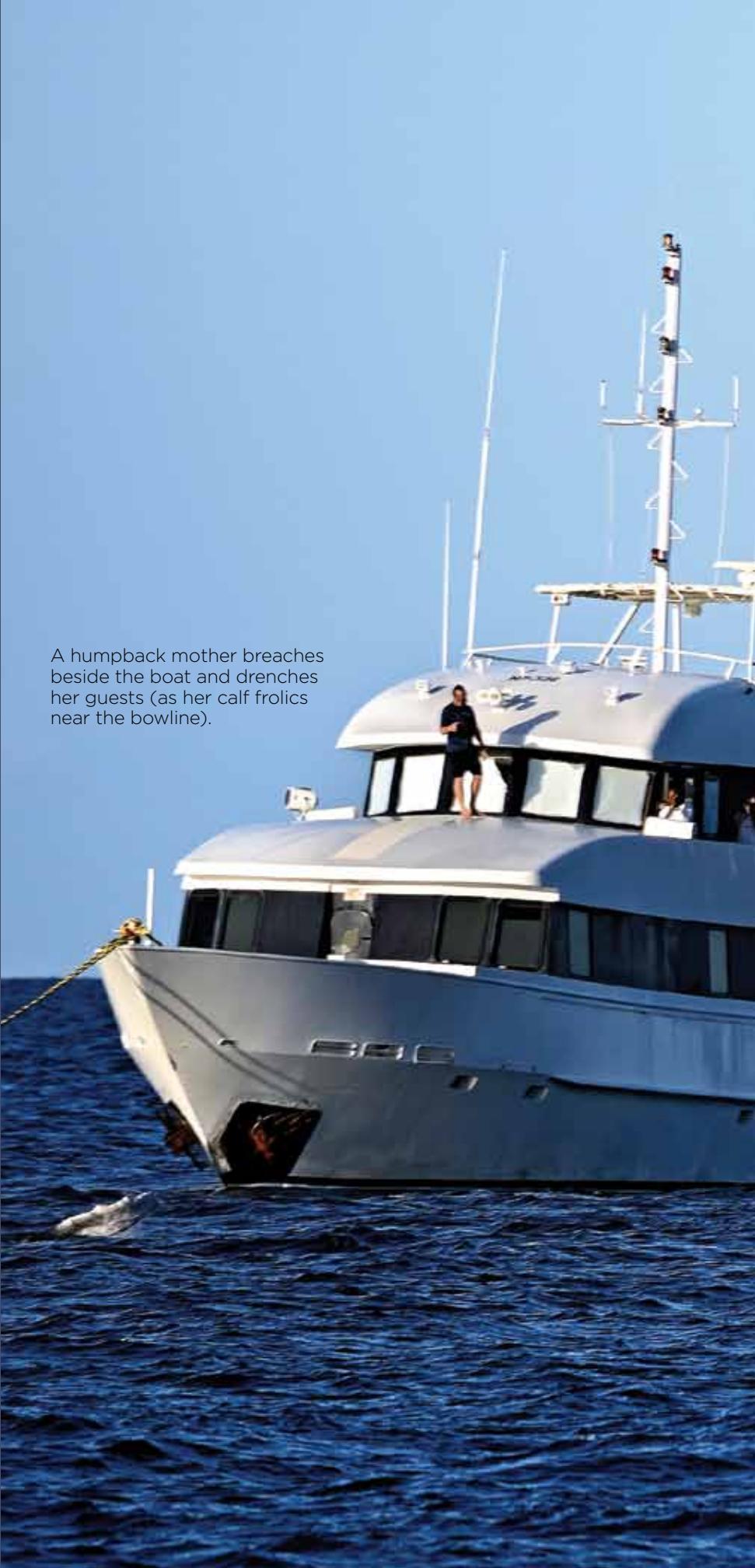
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A large white motorboat is shown from a low angle, moving across the blue ocean. A humpback whale is breaching the water near the boat's bow. A person in a dark shirt and shorts stands on the upper deck of the boat, looking towards the whale. The sky is clear and blue.

A humpback mother breaches
beside the boat and drenches
her guests (as her calf frolics
near the bowline).

A Whale of an Adventure:

Breaching the Boundaries of the Dominican Republic

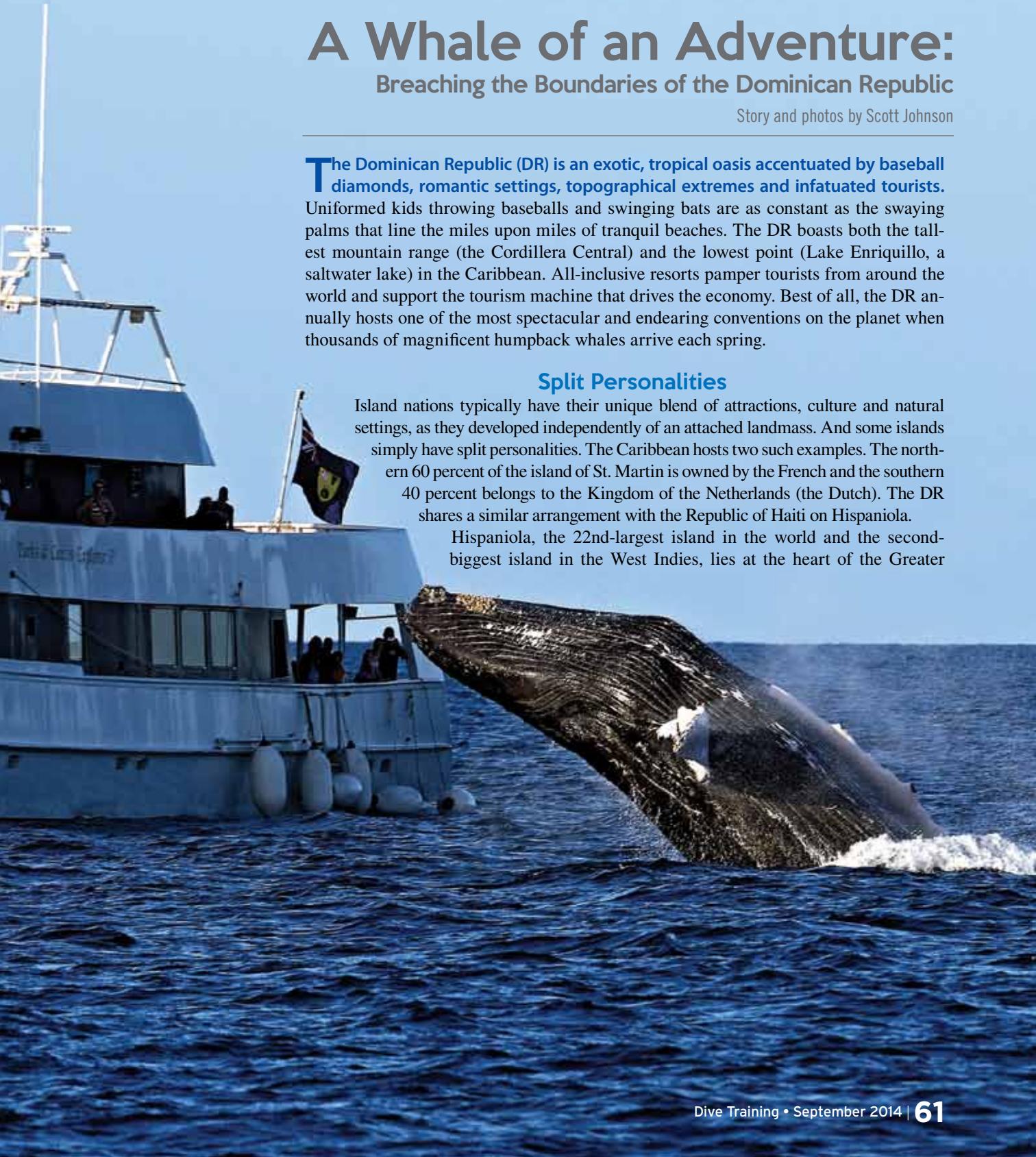
Story and photos by Scott Johnson

The Dominican Republic (DR) is an exotic, tropical oasis accentuated by baseball diamonds, romantic settings, topographical extremes and infatuated tourists. Uniformed kids throwing baseballs and swinging bats are as constant as the swaying palms that line the miles upon miles of tranquil beaches. The DR boasts both the tallest mountain range (the Cordillera Central) and the lowest point (Lake Enriquillo, a saltwater lake) in the Caribbean. All-inclusive resorts pamper tourists from around the world and support the tourism machine that drives the economy. Best of all, the DR annually hosts one of the most spectacular and endearing conventions on the planet when thousands of magnificent humpback whales arrive each spring.

Split Personalities

Island nations typically have their unique blend of attractions, culture and natural settings, as they developed independently of an attached landmass. And some islands simply have split personalities. The Caribbean hosts two such examples. The northern 60 percent of the island of St. Martin is owned by the French and the southern 40 percent belongs to the Kingdom of the Netherlands (the Dutch). The DR shares a similar arrangement with the Republic of Haiti on Hispaniola.

Hispaniola, the 22nd-largest island in the world and the second-biggest island in the West Indies, lies at the heart of the Greater





Antilles archipelago. It is bordered by the North Atlantic Ocean to the north and Caribbean Sea to the south. The Windward Passage to the northwest, Jamaica Channel to the southwest and Mona Passage to the east separate it from Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico, respectively. Lush mountains and fertile valleys dominate the interior. From alpine forests to arid desert-like plains, the geographic diversity creates a multitude of climatic zones. The DR occupies the eastern two-thirds of Hispaniola's 29,418 square miles (76,487 square km) and Haiti claims the western third.

The Greater Antilles islands are composed predominantly of continental rock, while those in the Lesser Antilles are volcanic and/or limestone in origin. Recent studies suggest the Caribbean tectonic plate collected fragments that used to belong to Central America before North and South America were pulled apart by opposing tectonic forces. These fragments were then carried over 1,000 miles (1,600 km) east and now form the Greater

Antilles. The North American Plate is now sliding under the Caribbean Plate and stressing Hispaniola's two major faults overhead. The resulting friction triggered the magnitude-7 quake that devastated Haiti in January 2010.

From Indians to Independence

Taino Indians, which originated as Amerindians in Central and South America, had peacefully inhabited Hispaniola for 5,000 years by the time Christopher Columbus discovered the island on December 5, 1492. The Spanish explorer was impressed by the island's beauty and the gentle natives. He was even more captivated by the Taino's gold jewelry and ornaments. The large complement of conquistadors that accompanied Columbus' return in 1493 enslaved the Taino and forced them to mine for gold. In less than 25 years of Spanish colonization, abuse, European diseases and famine reduced the Taino population of more than 1 million to fewer than 50,000.

The gold deposits had dwindled by 1515, so most of the Spanish prospectors left to seek riches in the Americas. In addition, Spain relocated its primary New World port from Santo Domingo to Havana, Cuba, in 1561. The weakened colony was beset by pirates, who had set up shop on Tortuga off the west coast. When Spain mandated its settlers in the west relocate to the east in 1603, French colonists gladly took their place. France officially took the keys to the western third of Hispaniola via the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 and renamed it Saint Domingue. France imported hundreds of thousands of African slaves to work sugar and cotton plantations and transformed Saint Domingue into one of the wealthiest colonies in the world. Spain ceded the remainder of the island to France in the Treaty of Basilea in 1795.

The French Revolution sparked the Saint Domingue slave rebellion in 1791, which culminated in the establishment of the Republic of Haiti (one

of the Taino names for Hispaniola) on January 1, 1804. Spain regained control of the eastern portion of Hispaniola in 1809, but then Haiti invaded and claimed the whole island from 1822 to 1844. Juan Pablo Duarte organized an underground resistance group named La Trinitaria in 1838. Their fight for independence was realized when the eastern two-thirds of the island was officially named the Dominican Republic on February 27, 1844. The next 150 years was dominated by dictators and caudillos (military leaders).

The United States used the Monroe Doctrine to intervene in DR affairs and to even occupy the country on multiple occasions (1916-1924 and 1965). This intervention stabilized the DR, but also spawned the ruthless dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. This former telegraph clerk used his leadership position in the newly created Guardia Nacional to rise to power in 1930 and then rule with an iron fist until he was assassinated on May 30, 1961. Joaquin Balaguer, his vice president at the time, then set up his own similar fiefdom until he was deposed in 1996. Recent elections and presidencies have shifted to a more genuine form of democracy.

More than 1.5 million Dominicans live in the United States and more than half reside in New York City. U.S. remittances to relatives in the DR, estimated at more than \$3.2 billion, are a vital clog in the DR economy. Major League Baseball (MLB) players are among the most famous DR immigrants and include Albert Pujols, Alex Rodriguez, Manny Ramirez, Pedro Martinez and Sammy Sosa. About 11 percent of the players on MLB rosters come from the DR.

A Swim In The Park

A variety of diving options can be found off every DR coast. There are light-dappled caverns, swim-throughs, colorful walls and wrecks, both artificial and natural. Prevailing winter winds in December and January often make East Coast sites off Punta Cana inaccessible. Underwater temps range



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from 75 degrees Fahrenheit (24 degrees Celsius) in the winter to a balmy 84 F (29 C) in the summer. The North Atlantic sites tend to be a degree or two cooler than those found in the south. Land-based operators are the only game in town and their services range from minimal to highly professional.

The most consistent diving conditions are found in the warm Caribbean waters of the La Caleta National Park, which is located between La Romana and Boca Chica in the south. This Marine Protected Area (MPA), the only marine park in the DR, was established in 1986 to reduce fishing and pollution-related problems on the area reefs and promote tourism. The government relocated the entire town of La Caleta to create the MPA. Of course, the displaced locals were not too happy about the situation at first and tended to ignore “no fishing” signs, as well as pleas to protect the park. Ineffectual enforcement and community apathy rendered the MPA’s protective measures moot.

Reef Check Dominican Republic (RCDR) began to turn things around in 2007 by promoting dive tourism as a preferable and sustainable alternative to traditional fishing. RCDR launched PR and education campaigns to build awareness of and support for the park and marine conservation, in general. The group even organized a trip for local fishers to visit successful MPAs off Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula. RCDR’s efforts paid off when the COOPRESCA fishing cooperative was formed. COOPRESCA fishers now play active roles in policing and monitoring the park. Fish stocks, live coral coverage and the overall health of the reefs have improved significantly due to the unified commitment of RCDR, COOPRESCA and the empowered local community.

The Silver Bank

A treasure-laden Spanish galleon named the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion* sailed from Havana, Cuba, in September 1641 in a convoy bound for

Spain. A hurricane lashed the fleet and left the dismasted *Concepcion* limping toward Puerto Rico. The wounded vessel foundered on a shallow reef north of the DR and millions of silver pesos spilled into the sea. The whereabouts of the broken remains remained a mystery until Williams Phips found the wreck in January 1687 and then successfully salvaged some of the lost loot over the following three months. This hazardous shallow-water reef system was appropriately given the moniker the “Silver Bank” thereafter.

The Silver Bank encompasses 20 square miles (52 sq km) of submerged limestone plateau that lies 65 miles (104 km) north of the DR and an almost equal distance southeast from the Turks and Caicos Islands. It boasts natural treasures much more valuable than mere silver from December to April each year when thousands of North Atlantic humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) migrate to the Antillean islands to calve and

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mate. Studies have shown the Silver Bank is the winter home for the largest population of humpbacks in the North Atlantic Ocean and perhaps even the world. The DR government officially declared the area a safe haven for marine mammals when it established the Silver Bank Sanctuary on October 14, 1986. The sanctuary was enlarged and renamed the “Sanctuary for the Marine Mammals of the Dominican Republic” on July 5, 1996. It now encompasses the Silver Bank, Navidad Bank Samana Bay, the Northern and Eastern DR coastlines and the deep water separating the various locations.

Sanctuary regulations place strict limits on the number of vessels and visitors on the Silver Bank during whale season, and outline the protocols that must be followed within the sanctuary boundaries. Three permits have been issued that allow operators to take a combined 500 incredibly fortunate guests per year to visit the whales. Crewmembers from the *Sun Dancer II*, *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* and *Turks & Caicos Explorer II* conduct in-depth briefings during the nine-hour crossing from the mainland and throughout their charters to ensure their guests clearly understand the guidelines and learn about the humpbacks. Humpbacks appear as soon as you first enter the Silver Bank and are ever-present until you leave. You can watch them from the mother ship from the time you awake in the morning until it gets too dark to see in the evening. Your daily routine while there is pretty simple: eat breakfast, visit the whales, eat lunch, visit the whales, eat dinner, go to sleep and then dream about whales you just met.

This is a snorkeling-only trip. Honestly, I have long been a scuba snob. There are very few reasons I would willingly don a snorkel versus a regulator. Even so, I confess I would gladly choose to spend a week snorkeling with the humpbacks over a week diving nearly anywhere in the world. I do not even need to spot a whale underwater to be overcome by emotion. My heart, more than my ears, reacts every time I hear the bulls plain-

tively serenading the ladies. The soft-in-water technique used to swim with the whales basically boils down to make as little noise as possible, remain at the surface, stay in a group and let the whales dictate the encounters.

Maternal Miracles and Marine Machismo

No one knows exactly why the humpbacks leave their feeding grounds

off Labrador, Newfoundland, Maine, Greenland, Iceland and Norway to make the 1,200-1,500 mile (1,920-2,400 km) journey south. Whatever the reasons, hormones certainly fuel the trip to their tropical breeding and calving grounds. Nonpregnant females go into heat and males become testosterone-saturated mammoths. Pregnant females are heavily swollen after a 10- to 11-month gestation and give birth

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FACTS AND FIGURES

Location: On the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola; 80 miles (128 km) due east of Puerto Rico.

Population: 10,349,741.

Capital: Santo Domingo.

Getting There: The DR has eight international airports conveniently located near the tourist hot spots. Daily flights run from numerous cities in the eastern United States, Caribbean and Europe. The Miami International Airport is the gateway for many.

Departure Tax/Visa: A \$10 tourist card on entry and a \$20 departure tax. All U.S. airline tickets include the \$20 departure tax.

Currency: The Dominican Peso, which is denoted as DOP and either \$ or RD\$. The current exchange rate is \$43.5 DOP to \$1 USD. U.S.-backed credit cards are readily accepted.

Electricity: 110 volts with U.S.-style plugs, but be prepared for the occasional outage.

Language: Spanish.

Time: Eastern Standard Time, but the DR does not observe daylight saving time.

Hyperbaric Chamber: A chamber is available in Puerto Plata and Santo Domingo.



The Christ the Redeemer statue atop Pico Isabel de Torres.



Climate and Dress: Climate is tropical humid. Conditions and seasonal fluctuations vary by region and elevation. More rain falls in the north and east. The northeast trade winds blow steadily from the Atlantic all year long. Hurricane season runs from June to November. Hats, sunglasses and sunscreen are essentials, especially during the eight to 10 hours a day on the water with the humpbacks.

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A humpback mother and her calf swimming near the surface.

shortly before or once they reach the Silver Bank. It would be nice if the males and moms/calves stayed in their own designated areas upon arrival, but, no, the Silver Bank is a free-for-all environment and raging hormones churn the water.

A mother humpback spends her time caring for her newborn. She nudges the calf to the surface on her rostrum to teach it to breathe. She feeds it 50-150 gallons (190 to 569 liters) of rich milk each day and must do so while swimming. Moms try to find quiet, shallow places to rest. She will sleep underwater for 20 minutes at a time, but the calf must surface every few minutes for fresh air. Sleeping moms often yield the most memorable encounters. A calf will generally hide under its mom's belly, surface, swim in circles while breathing and then return to his mom's lap. All the mom has to do is raise one of her giant pectoral fins like a garage door to offer the calf room to come and go. If the mom feels comfortable with your presence, she will continue to rest, while the calf investigates

the wide-eyed, dangly creatures on the surface. As long as the whales are not spooked by the snorkelers or other humpbacks, they often will tolerate your attention for more than an hour.

Mom and calf encounters can be described as exciting, but also sweet and tender. Encounters with females in estrus are often closer to wild sporting events. Rowdy groups involve multiple males rambunctiously vying for the attention of a lone lady. Males perform aquatic acrobatics, such as breaching, pec slapping and tail lobbing, in an attempt to be the winner. They may even resort to World Wrestling Federation-style body slams on one another, if necessary. Sometimes a male will spy hop (raise his head outside the water) your boat as if trying to figure out if it is another competitor.

My wife Lauren and I recently spent a couple of hours in the water with a male and female who were in the mood for love. The male escort had successfully vanquished the other would-be suitors and the object of his desire seemed to be in an amorous trance.

A female in such a state is called a Valentine and may have no qualms in violating your personal space.

A Whale of a Good Time

The DR offers plenty of options to keep you busy on the mainland. Sunbathing, hiking, caving, birding, biking, windsurfing, sightseeing and shopping are readily available. A visit to Santo Domingo will give you the chance to walk the cobblestone streets of the Colonial City, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1990. Here you can explore a place Columbus' brother Bartholomew established in 1496. Colonial City holds a historic collection of firsts: the first European city, cathedral, hospital and university of the New World. If you are there in February, you can join the festivities of Carnival, a countrywide celebration of DR's independence. Carnival can be fun and will give you plenty of chances to mix with the locals, but it does not compare to the wonders you will experience during the world's best marine convention on the Silver Bank.

