



▶ THE CARIBBEAN

Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island Hispaniola, which it shares with Haiti. Covering 18,815 square miles (48,731 square kilometers), it is about twice the size of New Hampshire. The central mountain range, Cordillera Central, boasts the highest point in the Caribbean, Pico Duarte, at a little more than 10,000 feet (3,048 meters). The Cibao Valley lies in the heart of the country and is the major agricultural area.

The Dominican Republic has a variety of landscapes, from deserts in the southwest to alpine forests in the central mountains. Sugarcane fields spread over coastal plains in the north and east, and coconut plantations cover most of the tropical peninsula of Samaná. Pebble beaches under rocky cliffs afford spectacular views on the southern coast. Elsewhere the coasts are dominated by white sandy beaches and warm waters.

Weather generally is tropical, hot, and humid, especially along southern and eastern coasts. Temperatures average in the high 90s or above during summer months, with August being the hottest. A dry, desert-like climate, due to deforestation and little rainfall, prevails in western and southwestern regions. Rainy seasons, when the temperature drops to the 70s, may vary in different parts of the country, but they generally run from December to March.

History. In pre-Columbian times, Arawak and Taíno Indians occupied the island. The arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 brought colonization, slavery, and disease, decimating the native population within decades. With the decrease in the indigenous workforce came the increased importation of West Africans to provide cheap labor for mines, sugar plantations, and cattle farms. The capital, Santo Domingo, was the first permanent European settlement in the New World and was

established by Spain in 1496. Santo Domingo's Colonial Zone is one of the great treasures of Spanish America today, with many original buildings still intact and newly restored.

In 1697, the western portion (now Haiti) of Hispaniola was given to France. In 1795, the entire island was ceded. Rebellious slaves seized Santo Domingo in 1801 and established Haiti as the first independent country in the region. The resulting Haitian domination of the Dominicans (1822–44) left a legacy of mistrust and strained relations that still endures. The Dominicans declared independence in 1844. Spain returned intermittently between local attempts at government. After an occupation by U.S. Marines (1918–24), a constitutional government was established.

Military dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo gained the presidency in 1930 and ruled for three decades until he was assassinated in 1961. His merciless persecution and massacre of Haitians in the late 1930s added to the list of grievances between the two countries. His death brought civilian unrest, political revolt, and division within the army. In 1965, U.S. Marines and an inter-American peacekeeping force stepped in. With stability restored, elections were held, and in 1966 the constitutional government was reestablished. Continuing under this system, today's Dominican Republic is the largest and most populous democracy in the Caribbean region.

An ally of Trujillo, Joaquín Balaguer, was nominally appointed president in 1961 but did not take office until 1966. For the next three decades, power rested in either his hands or those of his rival, Juan Bosch of the Dominican Liberation Party (PLD). As head of the Social Christian Reformist Party (PRSC), Balaguer narrowly won the 1994 elections and began his seventh term in office. Constitutional reforms required

Dominican Republic

elections two years later and did not permit Balaguer to run for a successive eighth term. The government has now embarked on a plan of economic reform and greater political openness. However, limited access to water, frequent power outages, high food prices, poverty, and high unemployment continue to fuel public discontent.

THE PEOPLE

Population. The Dominican Republic's population of roughly 9.5 million is growing at a rate of about 1.5 percent. More than one-third of the population is younger than age 16. The rural population is steadily decreasing through migration to cities. Mixed-race people account for 73 percent of the total population; 16 percent is Caucasian, and 11 percent is black. The mixed-race group is a combination of descendants of Spaniards and other Europeans, West African slaves, and perhaps some indigenous peoples. A Haitian minority is included in the black population. Additionally, more than one million Dominicans live full- or part-time in New York City, U.S.A.

Language. The official language is Spanish, but Caribbean phrases, accents, and regional expressions give Dominican Spanish a distinct personality. For example, when eating, people request *un chin* instead of the Spanish *un poquito* (a little bit) of something. Many people drop the *s* at the end of words, turning *dos* (two) into *do'*. Cibao Valley residents, or *Cibaños*, and inhabitants of Santo Domingo, or *capitaleños*, may pronounce the *r*, *l*, or *i* differently. The formal Spanish form of address for "you" (*usted*) is used, but most people prefer the more familiar *tú*. Some creole is spoken near the Haitian border and in the *bateys* (sugarcane villages), where many Haitian workers live.

Religion. Dominicans are 95 percent Catholic by record, but a much smaller number regularly attends church or strictly follows doctrine. Especially in rural areas, Catholic traditions are sometimes combined with local practices and beliefs. Although Dominicans are fairly secular, Catholic traditions are evident in daily life. Many houses contain artwork portraying the Virgin Mary and other saints, thought to protect the home's occupants. Some children are taught to "ask blessings" of their parents and other relatives upon seeing them. They might say *Bendición, tía* (Bless me, aunt), and the response is *Dios te bendiga* (May God bless you). Evangelical Christian churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other denominations are also present throughout the country.

General Attitudes. Dominicans are warm, friendly, and gregarious. They are very curious about others and forthright in asking personal questions. Children are rarely shy. *Machismo*—the desire of men to prove their manliness or superiority—permeates society, especially among rural and low-income groups. A proud, aggressive attitude is admired in sports, games, and business. Many people have a sharp entrepreneurial sense, and business etiquette can be aggressive in tourist areas. The common expression *Si Dios quiere* (If God wishes) may make Dominicans appear fatalistic or indifferent but more accurately expresses the attitude that personal power is intertwined with one's place in the family, community, and grand design of Deity. Relationships are more important than schedules, so being late for appointments or spending time socializing instead of working is socially acceptable.

Confianza (trust) is highly valued and not quickly or easily gained by outsiders. Borrowing is common, though an item may be forgotten and never returned. Most people are gener-

ous and helpful. Economic, social, and political class divisions, most evident in cities, define individuals and favor historically prominent families. Light skin and smooth hair are preferred over strong African features. Despite government efforts to build ties with Haiti, tension between Dominicans and Haitians continues.

Personal Appearance. Dominicans take pride in their personal appearance and place importance on dressing well. They draw on New York fashions, wearing the latest dresses, jeans, and athletic shoes. Clothes tend to be dressy and are always clean and well pressed. People often prefer bright colors and shiny fabrics. Jeans and short skirts are acceptable for women in urban areas, but dresses or skirts and blouses are more common in the countryside. Shorts are almost never worn, no matter what the temperature. A special event, such as a town meeting, always requires dressing up. Men often sport conservative hair cuts and are usually clean-shaven. They wear long pants and stylish shirts, except at the beach or when doing manual labor. Professional men wear business suits or the traditional *chacabana*, a white shirt worn over dark trousers, and well-shined shoes. Children are also dressed up, especially for church or visiting.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Men shake hands firmly when they greet. One offers a wrist or elbow if one's hand is dirty. Friends may also embrace. Most women will kiss each other once on the right cheek. A man with the *confianza* of a woman will kiss her on the cheek in greeting. A handshake and *¿Cómo está usted?* (How are you?) is a common formal greeting. Informally, one may say *¿Cómo tú e'rá?* (note the removal of the *s*'s) or *Hola* (Hi). After greeting, it is polite to ask about a person's family. Adults, particularly in the *campo* (countryside), often address each other as *compadre* (for men) or *comadre* (for women); both terms mean "friend." One might not greet a stranger on the street, but one would never enter a room without greeting each person. Nor would a person leave without saying goodbye to everyone. Formal introductions are rare, but professional titles are used to address respected persons. Older and more prominent people may be addressed as *Don* (for men) or *Doña* (for women), with or without their first names.

Gestures. People are animated in conversation. They point with puckered lips instead of a finger. Wrinkling one's nose indicates one does not understand, rubbing one's fingers and thumb together signifies money, and an upright wagging forefinger means "No." To express disapproval, one points (with lips) at the object or person and rolls the eyes. Tapping one's elbow with a closed fist means that someone is cheap. "Come here" is indicated with the palm down and fingers together waving inward. One says "psst" to get another's attention. To hail a taxi or bus, one wags a finger or fingers (depending on the number of passengers needing a ride) in the direction one is going. Numbers are often expressed with fingers instead of words. Personal space is limited; touching is normal and crowding is common.

Visiting. Visiting is an important form of social recreation, especially in rural areas and poor *barrios* (neighborhoods). Visits in the home are common, but much socializing also takes place in public (while shopping, washing clothes, and so forth). Women often gather in the kitchen or outside as they cook. A visit may be long or short and may occur at any time, usually without prior notice. Urbanites with telephones may call ahead, but whether expected or not, company is always

genuinely welcomed. In rural areas doors are kept open; people consider it strange to close them and not accept visitors. Visitors stand in the doorway and shout *Buenos días* (Good morning) or *Saludos* (Greetings), to which the host responds *Entre* (Come in).

To Dominicans, privacy is unimportant; they perceive the desire for solitude as sadness and equate being alone with being lonely. Nearly all homes have *mesadoras* (rocking chairs), in which people sit while talking or just sharing time. Hosts offer visitors something to drink (coffee or juice) and invite them to eat if mealtime is near. Refusing such offers is not impolite. If guests interrupt someone eating, the person will immediately and sincerely invite them to share what is left by saying *A buen tiempo* (You've come at a good time). Guests may decline by saying *Buen provecho* (Enjoy), or they may sit down and eat.

Eating. The main meal, *comida*, is served at midday and often lasts two hours. Families prefer eating at home. Urban workers unable to return home may eat at inexpensive cafés or buy from vendors. *Desayuno* (breakfast) usually is light: sweetened coffee and bread. People in urban areas often eat a bit more. *Cena* (the evening meal) is also light, often not more than a snack or leftovers from *comida*. Guests are served first, and sometimes separately and more elaborately. Table conversation is often lively. Dining out is popular among those who can afford it. A service charge is typically included in the bill.

LIFESTYLE

Family. Family ties are important; extended families commonly live together. Many households are led by women, whether they are widowed, divorced, married to men who work elsewhere, or are older and without children and grandchildren. It is common for women, men, and boys to work outside the home. The boys shine shoes or sell snacks on the streets. Large families are the norm, and many rural villages are composed of interrelated families. Within the extended family, informal adoption is common: other family members take in and raise children whose parents need help, including those working in New York. Siblings raised by one mother may have different fathers, but all children are cared for equally. Cousins are often as close as siblings. Some men have more than one wife and family. Smaller, nuclear families tend to be more common among the educated urban population.

Housing. In the Dominican Republic, the wealthiest people tend to live in isolated, guarded communities. The houses are big, and the grounds may include swimming pools, tennis courts, basketball courts, and attractive gardens. Most Dominicans do not live in this kind of luxury. While urban apartments and newly constructed condominiums are becoming popular, reasonably well-off city dwellers have their own homes. However, they have to make numerous concessions. Some will paint only the front of their house, and others will settle for dirt floors. Houses are usually constructed of cement or wood topped with zinc roofs.

In the countryside, accommodations tend to be far more basic. Some rural houses are made of plantain tree leaves and sticks. Inside, inhabitants often have to do without running water. In such cases, buckets are positioned to collect water from pipes along the roof. In kitchens, there is sometimes only a camping stove for cooking. Many rural communities have electricity; however, pirating has prompted the country's only two electricity companies to withhold power for hours at a time.

Dating and Marriage. Attending movies, discos, dances, baseball games, and sitting on park benches are social activities for couples. Dating is relatively open and increasingly free of parental control. Girls often go out in groups and are more closely supervised than boys. Some couples might have a sibling tagging along as chaperon. Marriages in the Dominican Republic are often common-law (*por la ventana*); common law spouses are referred to as *maridos*. Couples also marry by civil ceremony or in a church. Elaborate urban weddings are major social events.

Life Cycle. Dominican children often have several first names, and girls have two surnames—their mother's and their father's. When a woman marries, she drops both and takes that of her husband. As is the case in many Latin American countries, Dominican girls enjoy big celebrations on their *quinceñera* (fifteenth birthday). When a person dies, family members, friends, and neighbors congregate at the house of the deceased for a *vela* (candlelight vigil). Near the body, relatives and other mourners cry out loudly. Usually within 24 hours of the death, the casket is mounted into a truck cab and escorted to the cemetery site by mourners who follow on foot. A speech is then given at the burial site. Nine days later, and then every year on the anniversary of the death, more *velas* are held.

Diet. If Dominicans do not eat rice and beans at midday, they feel they have not eaten. Most meals feature rice along with such favorites as *habichuelas* (beans) and *yuca* (cassave). *Yuca* may be boiled, battered and deep-fried, or baked into rounds of crisp cracker bread called *casabe*. *Plátanos* (plantains) and bananas are plentiful. Mangoes, papaya, pineapples, guavas, avocados, and other tropical fruits (passion fruit, coconuts, and star fruit) are grown locally and eaten in season. People may eat small quantities of chicken, beef, pork, or goat with a meal. A meal of rice, beans, and chicken is nicknamed *la bandera*, referring to the colors of the national flag. *Bacalao* (dried fish, usually cod) is eaten in some areas; fresh fish is eaten only along the coast. Food is generally not spicy.

The national dish is *sancocho*, a rich vegetable-and-meat stew served on special occasions. *Habichuelas con dulce* (a dessert similar to rice pudding but made with beans) is popular at Easter. Dominican coffee is usually served sweet and strong. National beers and rums are highly regarded and widely consumed. Bottled soft drinks, sweetened fruit juices, and fruit *batidas*, or milkshakes, are popular.

Recreation. Playing dominoes is a national pastime. Outdoor tables in front of homes, bars, and rural *colmados* (neighborhood markets) are surrounded by men who play for hours, especially on Sundays. Outdoor players are almost exclusively men, but everyone—including young children—may play at home. Cockfighting is another national pastime, and cockfight gambling stakes can be high. The lottery also has high participation. Baseball is the most popular sport, and many Dominicans have become famous major league players in the United States and Canada. Boys also enjoy playing basketball, and boys and girls enjoy playing volleyball. Strolling in parks, visiting friends, and watching television are popular activities.

The Arts. Dominicans love music and dancing. *Merengue* is the national dance, and many people, including small children, know the steps. Its fast-paced, rhythmic music traditionally is performed using three instruments: a *tambora* (small drum), *melodeon* (similar to an accordian), and *guayano* (scraping percussion instrument). *Bachata* is a popular folk dance accompanied by accordions, drums, horns, and *guayanos*. Salsa and other Latino styles of music are popular, as are North

Dominican Republic

American pop and jazz. Discos are found even in rural communities. Literature from the Dominican Republic is well established. Much writing focuses on nationalistic themes, social protest, history, and everyday life. Common crafts include masks for *Carnaval*, colorful paintings, faceless dolls, and jewelry made from amber or *larimar* (a blue stone unique to the Dominican Republic). Statues carved from wood, coconut shells, and stone are also popular.

Holidays. National holidays include New Year's Day, *Día de los Reyes* (Day of the Kings, 6 Jan.), *Nuestra Señora de la Alta Gracia* (Our Lady of High Gratitude, 21 Jan.), Duarte's Day (26 Jan.), Independence Day (27 Feb.), Easter, Labor Day (1 May), Corpus Christi, Restoration of Independence (16 Aug.), *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes* (Our Lady of Mercies, 24 September), Columbus Day (12 Oct.), and Christmas. Urban families go to the beach or mountains during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week before Easter). *Carnaval* is celebrated for several weeks in the early spring with costume parades, complete with masked participants hitting spectators with inflated, hardened pig bladders, and other festivities. Gifts are not exchanged at Christmas, but they may be given to children on 6 January. The government may call special holidays to celebrate an event or project completion.

SOCIETY

Government. The Dominican Republic is divided into 31 provinces and one national district. The president, currently Leonel Fernandez, and vice president are elected by the people. A bicameral National Congress of 32 senators and 178 deputies is also directly elected, as are local officials. Major parties include the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), the PLD, and the PRSC. National and local elections are held simultaneously every four years. The voting age is 18. A nine-member Supreme Court is appointed by the Senate.

Economy. The economy, once dependent on agriculture, is becoming more oriented toward service and tourism. Agriculture, however, still remains an important industry. Coffee, sugar, pineapple, cocoa, tobacco, and rice are key crops for both export and domestic use. Fluctuating world prices impact earnings and make the domestic market somewhat volatile. Dominicans living abroad often send earnings back to families in the Republic; the money constitutes an important source of revenue. Industrial activity includes sugar refining, cement, mining, and pharmaceuticals. Assembly plants for various products are located in duty-free zones, as are clothing factories and telemarketing offices. The environment has suffered from the exploitation of mineral and natural resources, but efforts at conservation are being made. In 2007, the Dominican Republic implemented the free-trade agreement DR-CAFTA.

Among Latin American countries, the Dominican Republic's economic growth has remained strong despite hurricanes and the global economic downturn. However, even though real GDP per capita has nearly tripled in the last generation, most people (particularly women) do not have access to economic prosperity. A wide gap exists between rich and poor. At least one-fourth of Dominicans live in poverty. Unemployment is high while underemployment is rampant. Inflation is relatively low. The currency is the Dominican *peso* (DOP).

Transportation and Communications. Main roads are paved and heavily traveled. Rural roads are often unpaved and may

POPULATION & AREA

Population	9,507,133 (rank=86)
Area, sq. mi.	18,815 (rank=127)
Area, sq. km.	48,731

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	79 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	73 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$8,217
Adult literacy rate	87% (male); 87% (female)
Infant mortality rate	26 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	69 (male); 75 (female)

be impassable during rainy seasons. Public transportation includes motorcycle taxis, larger buses, or economical vans or buses called *guaguas* that are used for local or long-distance trips. Pickup trucks or small vans travel between rural villages, carrying passengers, animals, and cargo in a single load. Urban Dominicans travel by *conchos*, informal taxis that follow certain routes. Private cars are expensive but by no means rare. Motorcycles are more common.

Telephone service is available throughout the country, and middle- and upper-class families have phones. Daily newspapers are read widely. Postal service is slow and unreliable. Most businesses use private messenger services. Private radio and television stations broadcast regionally and nationally.

Education. Free public education is provided through the high school level. Attendance is mandatory through the eighth grade, but many children, particularly girls and those in the *campo*, cannot attend or do not complete school for various reasons (work, lack of transport, home and family responsibilities, or lack of money to buy required uniforms). While more than three-fourths of Dominicans begin school, only one-third finish. Parents and teachers must provide basic supplies such as pencils and paper. Textbooks and other materials are scarce. Many urban families send their children to private schools called *colegios*. Students are required to take a national standardized test at the end of eight and twelfth grades. University education is available, and trade schools provide technical training. The adult literacy rate is lower in rural areas.

Health. Public hospitals provide free care, but private doctors are preferred when affordable. Public institutions tend to be poorly equipped and understaffed; families must provide bedding and food for admitted patients. Clinics are better equipped but can be costly. Village health care workers have enough training to administer basic services, but rural areas often have no doctors or medicine, and people must travel elsewhere for care. Many people still consult *curanderos* (native healers). Lack of early treatment and preventive care is a major concern. Vaccination campaigns are helping fight disease, but maladies such as malaria, intestinal parasites, and dengue fever pose serious challenges.

AT A GLANCE

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