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► THE CARIBBEAN

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Haiti covers 10,714 square miles (27,750 square kilometers) of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with the Dominican Republic. Just smaller than Maryland, Haiti is comprised of two peninsulas split by the Gulf of Gonâve. The mountainous, nearly barren island of Gonâve rests in the center of the gulf.

Haiti's portion of Hispaniola is significantly more mountainous, with successive mountain chains running east to west on both peninsulas. The northern Massif du Nord is part of the island's backbone, which Dominicans call the Cordillera Central. The southern peninsula boasts the Massif de la Hotte and Massif de la Selle. The highest peak, Pic la Selle, is located in the Massif de la Selle and rises to 8,793 feet (2,680 meters). Hills and valleys punctuate the mountains, and it is there where most people live and work. The four main plains include the Central, Northern, Artibonite, and Plaine du Cul-de-Sac (where the capital, Port-au-Prince, is located). Haiti is crossed by several large rivers, the longest of which is the Artibonite.

Haiti's climate is warm and only mildly humid. Frost, snow, and ice do not form anywhere—even at the highest elevations. The average temperature in the mountains is 66°F (19°C), while at Port-au-Prince it is 81°F (27°C). Spring and autumn are rainy, whereas December to February and June to August are dry. July is the driest summer month. The hurricane season lasts from June to October.

History. The island of Hispaniola was originally inhabited by Taíno and Arawak Indians. After Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492, opening Spanish colonization on Hispaniola, the indigenous peoples were enslaved. Within a few decades, a million of them died from starvation, hard labor in Spanish gold mines, and European diseases such as smallpox and mea-

sles. In a belated effort to save the remaining Indians and to help their sugar plantations prosper, the Spanish settlers began importing African slaves by 1517. By 1560, few Indians remained. The 2,000 Spanish settlers controlled the island and some 30,000 African slaves.

In 1697, Spain ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France, which soon enjoyed the coffee, sugar, and cotton riches of its new colony, Saint Domingue. France obtained the entire island by 1795.

The slaves had begun revolting in 1791, but their efforts were futile until Toussaint L'Ouverture (a freed slave) led a revolt in 1798. He was eventually captured and subsequently died in a French prison. However, Jean-Jacques Dessalines became the slave leader and gained victory over the French in 1803. Haiti declared its independence on 1 January 1804. French settlers who were not killed left the island. Dessalines became the emperor.

When Dessalines was killed in 1806, political chaos and rivalries led to General Henry Christophe gaining the throne in 1811. However, Christophe did not control the southern half of the nation. He ruled the north as King Henry I until he committed suicide in 1820. In 1822, north and south were reunited under President Jean-Pierre Boyer, who also gained power over the Dominican Republic. Although Boyer was overthrown in 1844, the era still perpetuates tensions between the two neighbors. Power changed hands a few times until the 20th century, which found Haiti near anarchy. Under the United States's Monroe Doctrine, which essentially sought to maintain U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere, U.S. troops invaded and occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

The following years did not bring stability to Haiti, as people

Haiti

revolted against the government and elites who controlled it. In 1957, François Duvalier won presidential elections, despite charges of fraud. He killed his opponents and ruled with impunity, terrorizing the populace with his *Tontons macoutes*, the secret police. Before he died in 1971, “Papa Doc” Duvalier designated his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, “Baby Doc,” as his successor. Riots in 1985 forced Duvalier to flee Haiti in 1986.

A succession of military-led governments ruled Haiti until 1990, when Jean-Bertrand Aristide became the nation’s first democratically elected president. Glee over his election was followed by impatience for reform and violence between Aristide’s supporters and opponents. After just eight months in office, the military overthrew Aristide. General Raoul Cédras took power. Aristide made his way to the United States and set up a government in exile. His supporters in Haiti either went into hiding or were killed. The military dictatorship became increasingly brutal, and the international community decided to intervene with an embargo.

The embargo, ineffective at first, isolated Haiti in 1994 after the United States threatened further action. In September 1994, 20,000 U.S. soldiers landed in Haiti to overthrow the military. Two weeks later, Aristide returned from exile to rule for nearly a decade. In 1995, a UN peacekeeping force replaced the U.S. mission and began to train Haiti’s new police force. Haiti continues to struggle with violent clashes between government and opposition groups, fraudulent elections, failed coups, and economic devastation.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Haiti’s population of 7.5 million is growing annually at about 1.7 percent. The country has a high birthrate, but emigration and poor health keep growth down. Most Haitians are descendants of Black African slaves who came to the island beginning in the 16th century. A small proportion (5 percent) are of mixed heritage or white. A large number of Haitians live in Florida and New York, although there are Haitian communities in other U.S. states as well.

Language. Haitian Creole is the language of daily conversation. French is used in government and business. Only educated adults or secondary school students speak French. Haitian Creole is a unique mixture of French and African languages. It is similar to Creole spoken on some other Caribbean islands, such as Guadeloupe and Martinique. Haitian Creole is traditionally an oral language, though it had a written form even in the 19th century. Use of written Creole began to spread after the 1940s with the introduction of adult literacy programs. People are increasingly interested in English, which is heard on television broadcasts from the United States. Also, because most Haitian families have a relative in the United States, English is used more often than in the past.

Religion. The majority (80 percent) of Haitians are Catholic. Protestants claim 16 percent or more of the population. The largest denominations are Baptist, Pentecostal, and Seventh-day Adventist. Perhaps as important as organized religion is voodoo, which is practiced to some degree by a majority of Haitians. Though Catholic priests oppose voodoo, it has incorporated the worship of Catholic saints and the use of other Catholic rituals. Voodoo ceremonies and rituals, held in temples, usually are performed at night. Voodoo adherents believe that during the temple ceremonies, a voodoo god inhabits the body of a believer. Not all voodoo adherents practice the religion openly. Still, certain voodoo temples are the focus of annual pilgrimages.

General Attitudes. Haitians are warm, friendly, and generous. Their tradition for hospitality is clear in how they treat guests or go out of their way to help strangers find an address or something else they need. Haitians are proud of their culture and history. The stories of past Haitian heroes are not forgotten by today’s youth. Some claim this is because the present offers no heroes, but others believe the past gives hope for the future.

Everyday life is hard for most Haitians, so parents strive to send their children to school, trusting that an education will give the next generation a better life. No matter society’s conditions, Haitians celebrate life with joy, laughter, and dancing.

Rural and urban people have different perspectives on life, as their cultural practices and attitudes vary significantly. Urban people consider themselves to be more European or cosmopolitan than people from the countryside. The rural dwellers value their traditions and slower pace of life.

Personal Appearance. Whenever possible, people pay great attention to their public appearance. Urban Haitians prefer to wear Western-style clothing. Women wear both pants and colorful dresses. Some wear a headdress to match their outfit. Young people like to wear shorts; they follow the latest North American fashion trends. Sandals are the most popular footwear. Government officials and businessmen wear suits and ties. Rural men wear T-shirts and shorts or pants when working. Rural women wear dresses and head scarves, but they rarely wear pants. All Haitian women enjoy jewelry and brightly colored clothing. Men also wear gold jewelry as a status symbol.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Personal greetings are very important to Haitians. When entering a room or joining a group, a person is expected to physically greet each individual. Haitians usually shake hands when meeting a new acquaintance. Everyone else, from relatives to friends and casual acquaintances, receives a kiss on each cheek. The most common verbal greeting is *Bonjour, kouman ou ye?* (Good day, how are you?). The response usually is *Byen mèsi, e ou?* (Well, thank you, and you?).

Haitians address superiors or persons of status by title and last name (*Monsieur, Madame, Doctor*, etc.). Friends use first names or nicknames. An older person might be called “aunt” or “uncle” even if not related to the speaker.

Gestures. Haitians are an animated people who enjoy impromptu gatherings wherever they may be—at the market, in the street, at movie theaters. At such gatherings, people engage in loud conversation and laughing. Hand gestures usually accompany discussion or storytelling. If one is too busy to talk, one will greet a passerby by nodding the head up. To get someone’s attention, Haitians often say “pssst.”

Visiting. Visiting is a national pastime. Friends, neighbors, and relatives are welcome in the home at any time of day until about 8 p.m. It is not necessary to call ahead. Visitors arriving during a meal may be asked to wait in another room until the family finishes eating. Close friends might be invited to share the meal. They may accept or decline. It is also acceptable for guests to decline refreshments. Hosts typically offer fruit juice or soda. In addition to impromptu visits, Haitians enjoy inviting friends over for an evening of socializing or for dinner. When a visit ends, hosts accompany guests to the door. Rather than leaving, however, Haitians frequently extend their visit for a while by standing and talking with their hosts.

Special occasions also call for visits. Guests take gifts to hosts celebrating a communion, baptism, graduation, or wed-

ding. The events may prompt people to organize an elaborate party. Friends and relatives also expect to visit the bereaved after a funeral.

Eating. Haitians eat three meals a day if they can afford it. Peasants may eat *cassave* (bread made from manioc) and coffee for breakfast, and they may not eat again until evening. The family gathers at the table for the main meal, which is usually at midday in cities. Diners take their portions from serving dishes on the table. If guests are present, they are given first opportunity to serve themselves. When no guests are present, family members often wait for the mother to begin eating before they eat. People eat at restaurants for special occasions. Sunday dinner traditionally is reserved as a family meal.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The basic unit of society is the extended family. Parents live with their married children and grandchildren. It is uncommon and generally unacceptable for the elderly to live alone or in a nursing facility. The father, if present in the home, is head of the household and responsible for earning an income. Single-mother households are very common, as men typically have children by more than one woman in their lifetime. Children stay with the mother in a divorce; the divorce rate is fairly high.

Urban families might have three or four children, while rural families have as many as ten or more. Most Haitians do not enjoy living in apartments, so houses are more common. Urban homes are built of cement block. The rural poor might use mud brick. Wherever possible, people have a garden next to their homes. Rural men work their fields, while women sell produce in the market. Rural and urban women care for the household and children. Urban families may have a servant to cook and do other chores.

Dating and Marriage. Although Haitian youth socialize in groups, they do not usually begin dating until their late teens, when they finish school. Young people are free to choose their spouse; familial preference does not play a role in dating or marriage. When dating, the man will visit the woman at her home to become familiar with her parents and family members. Couples like movies, dancing, or other social events.

Urban couples typically have a church wedding followed by an evening reception. Receptions are usually held in private homes, where celebrants eat, dance, and socialize until late in the evening. In rural areas, a couple will not officially marry until they can afford a big wedding. They live together and have children as if married until they save enough money for the wedding.

Diet. Haitians usually eat rice and beans every day, although a main meal usually also includes meat, salad, and a vegetable. Rice and corn are staple grains. Spicy foods are most popular. *Piman zwazo* (small hot pimentos) and garlic are often added to dishes. Meat is marinated in sauces with ingredients such as sour orange juice, lemon juice, and hot peppers. For breakfast, one might eat the traditional urban fare of coffee, herring with plantains and avocados, corn with codfish, or liver with plantains. A lighter breakfast consists of bread, butter, and jam with coffee. A favorite daytime snack might be bread and butter or pastries.

Pork is the most popular meat, but Haitians also eat goat, chicken, guinea pig, and seafood (fish, shrimp, conch, crab, etc.). Meat-filled pastries are favorite snacks. Eggplant, yams, sweet potatoes, and a variety of fruits round out the diet. Haiti is especially known for its fresh-pressed juices made from pas-

sion fruit, oranges, *pamplemousse* (grapefruit), cherries, papaya, *zikak*, and other fruits.

Recreation. All Haitians have access to radios, and people generally listen to music and news throughout the day. A growing number of urban families are able to afford a television in their homes. Few people own VCRs, but they can watch videos at television stores. Haitian music videos are favored.

The most popular sport is soccer. Streets are empty if an important regional or world match is being televised. Children—both boys and girls—begin to play soccer at an early age. Leagues are organized throughout the country. Adult soccer stars are extremely popular among people of all ages. Men enjoy cockfights, usually held on Sunday afternoon. They also spend hours playing dominoes and cards.

The Arts. Music and dancing are integral to everyday life. Disco, reggae, and *konpa*, (related to big band music played in the United States during the 1940's) are popular in cities. *Meringue*, a mixture of African rhythms and European music, is the national dance. Urban residents enjoy a variety of North American music.

Haitian artists and sculptors are known for their unique images and striking colors. One popular art form is sculpture made from cut, pounded, and painted scrap metal. *Tap-taps*, also considered art, are brightly painted pickup trucks fitted with benches and covered tops. Many artists choose Haitian history or daily life for their subject. Nature is also an important theme. Painted screens, papier-mâché art, wood carvings, basketwork, pottery, and painted wooden boxes are prominent crafts.

Oral literature is abundant and includes songs, proverbs, and riddles. Storytellers carefully craft their performance, acting out the story with their voice. Most written Haitian literature is in French, although Creole is now commonly used.

Holidays. Haiti's national holidays include New Year's, which is also Independence Day; National Heroes Day (2 Jan.); Constitution Day (29 Mar.); Easter; Flag Day (18 May); *Fête Dieu* (Marks the institution of the sacrament of communion, first Thursday in June); and Christmas. Freedom from the Duvalier dictatorship is celebrated on 7 February. On New Year's Day, Haitians traditionally visit their parents and friends to wish them well in the new year.

Carnaval, held before the Catholic Lent, is a festive time for dancing and parades. People prepare for the holiday for weeks in advance; beginning just after New Year's, pre-*Carnaval* activities occur every Sunday. On the holiday itself, people awaiting the main parade dance to music they play on their own portable stereos. The partying continues all night and into the early morning hours for two or three days. Stores are open only in the morning on these days.

Various Catholic feasts are also marked but are not necessarily public holidays. *Fèt Gede* (2 Nov.) honors the dead, who are highly venerated in Haitian culture. Each village or town has a holiday for the local patron saint, celebrated with a morning mass, daytime festival, and evening ball. Some of these festivals are very large, such as the *Fête de Notre Dame*. From mid-January to Easter, local bands known as *Rara* dance and perform in the streets; they have their own rituals that carry some religious overtones. The holiday *Rara* is a more traditional version of *Carnaval*, which is not really celebrated in the countryside.

Commerce. Most businesses are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., but shops may close at 3 p.m. during the summer. Open-air markets have varying hours, depending on their location. Most

Haiti

shops are closed on Sunday, except for urban supermarkets. The majority of people lack refrigeration and so shop daily for perishable foods. Rural people often grow their own food.

SOCIETY

Government. The Republic of Haiti is divided into nine departments (provinces), but the central government has most control over political affairs. The president, currently Boniface Alexandre, is head of state, and the prime minister, currently Gerard Latortue, is head of government. The constitution allows for a bicameral parliament, with a 27-seat Senate and an 83-seat Chamber of Deputies. The voting age is 18. The two most powerful political parties, *Fanmi Lavalas* (Lavalas Family Party) and the Struggling People's Organization, oppose each other in political conflicts.

Economy. Haiti's economy is based on agriculture, which employs more than two-thirds of the workforce. Large farms are rare, so production quantities are small. Around 80 percent of all Haitians live in poverty. Real wages have not risen in a generation. The most important cash crops include coffee, cacao, and sugar. However, little is actually exported, and international aid is necessary to develop future agricultural potential. Industrial activity is minimal, geared mostly for domestic needs (cement, sugar refining, etc.). A few industries make toys and clothing for export. The economy is experiencing little to no growth. Corruption, high unemployment, political instability, and inefficient state enterprises are major stumbling blocks to additional development. The government is working to privatize some state companies, but the process is slow and unpopular. Haiti's currency is the *gourde* (HTG).

Transportation and Communications. For short distances, most Haitians travel by foot. In cities, they may also ride buses, taxis, or a colorful *tap-tap*, which travels fixed routes but not on a fixed schedule. Intercity transportation is made by bus, boat, or plane. Few people own private cars.

Middle- and upper-income urban homes have phones. Otherwise, people go to a central telephone office. Phone booths are rare because of vandalism. The postal system is generally reliable but not protected against theft. A person can post a message on certain radio stations or send a written message via truck drivers. The drivers drop the messages at a store on their way and recipients can retrieve them. Haiti has two daily newspapers, about two hundred radio stations, and several television stations.

Education. Haiti's school system is patterned after the French model, with kindergarten, a primary school that lasts six years, and secondary school that lasts seven years. Many urban dwellers send their children to private schools, even though tuition can be a burden. In fact, two-thirds of all schools are private. Regardless of where children attend, their daily schooling is often interrupted by street demonstrations. Because these events can be very violent, parents tend to keep children home whenever a protest is announced or anticipated.

Students who complete secondary school may pursue higher education at a university or other private institutions. The country's main university is the State University of Haiti. Students who do not complete their education often work on family farms, especially in rural areas.

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	150 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	122 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,860
Adult literacy rate	53 percent (male); 49 (female)
Infant mortality rate	76 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	49 (male); 50 (female)

Health. Haiti's national health system is unable to meet the needs of most people due to the lack of funds, staff, and modern equipment. Malaria, hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, dengue fever, and other diseases combine with malnutrition to keep life expectancy rates low and infant mortality rates high. Most children do not receive proper vaccinations. Proper sanitation and clean water are also lacking.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In early 2004, protests against the presidency of Jean Bertrand-Aristide culminated in rebels capturing several cities, both rebels and government troops suffering several deaths among their ranks, and Aristide leaving the country—possibly under threat of force. The UN Security Council voted to send troops to restore order in the area. Meanwhile, Supreme Court Chief Justice Boniface Alexandre was sworn in as interim president.
- In January 2004, Haiti marked 200 years of independence from France. The country's leaders praised Haiti for being the first black republic and for continuing to be an example to many countries. However, along with those enjoying the festivities, anti-government protestors took to the streets in several cities, and an air convoy carrying South African president Thabo Mbeki was fired upon. The president was not harmed, but several injuries among the protestors were reported.
- In October 2003, a global corruption index compiled by business leaders and academics rated Haiti's public officials and politicians the third most corrupt among 133 nations. Only Bangladesh and Nigeria were believed to be worse.
- In July 2003, the Inter-American Development Bank renewed a \$220 million loan program to help reduce poverty in Haiti. The nation's leaders were hopeful that the renewal would help breed further international support.
- In April 2003, President Aristide recognized voodoo as being on the same level as the nation's other religions. Voodoo practitioners in Haiti may now perform legally binding religious ceremonies, such as marriages.
- Two failed coup attempts in 2001 left several dead but President Aristide still in power. Former army officials were accused of masterminding the coups.

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