



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island of 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, warm, and humid, especially in summer months and along southern and eastern coasts. A dry, desert-like climate, due to deforestation and little rainfall, prevails in western and southwestern regions. Rainy seasons may vary in different parts of the country, but they generally are in the late spring and early fall.

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 vanishing indigenous workforce came the increased importation of West Africans to provide cheap labor for mines, sugar plantations, and cattle farms.

The first permanent European settlement in the New World was established by Spain in 1496 as Santo Domingo. Santo Domingo's Colonial Zone is one of the great treasures of Span-

ish 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 Latin America. 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 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 elections two years later and did not permit Balaguer to run for

Dominican Republic

a successive eighth term. The government has embarked on a plan of economic reform and greater political openness. However, frequent power outages, high food prices, poverty, and high unemployment continue to fuel public discontent.

THE PEOPLE

Population. The Dominican Republic's population of about 8.7 million is growing at a rate of about 1.4 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 while 16 percent is Caucasian and 11 percent is black. The mixed-race group is a combination of Spaniards and other Europeans, descendants of West African slaves, and descendants of natives. 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 it 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 *Cibaenños*, may pronounce the *r*, *l*, and *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. Rural residents sometimes combine Catholic traditions with local practices and beliefs. Although Dominicans are fairly secular, Catholic traditions are evident in daily life. 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, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 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* permeates society, especially among rural and low-income groups; males enjoy privileges not accorded to females. A proud and aggressive attitude is admired in sports, games, and business. Many people have a sharp entrepreneurial sense, but this does not mean that business etiquette is aggressive.

The common expression *Si Dios quiere* (If God wishes) may make Dominicans appear fatalistic or indifferent. However, it more fully 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, and although an item may be forgotten and never returned, most people are generous and helpful. Economic, social, and political class divisions, most evident in cities, 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 are clean and well groomed. They take pride in their personal appearance and place importance on dressing well. Dominicans 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. The people often prefer bright colors, shiny fabrics, and a lot of jewelry. Jeans and short skirts are acceptable for women in urban areas, but dresses or skirts and blouses are more common in the countryside. A special event, such as a town meeting, always requires dressing up. Men 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. 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 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. It is polite to ask about a person's family. *¡Hola!* is an informal "Hi," as is *¡Saludos!* Adults, particularly in the *campo* (countryside), often address each other as *compadre* (for men) or *comadre* (for women). One might not greet a stranger on the street, but one would never enter a room without greeting everyone present. Nor would a person leave without saying good-bye 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. Dominicans are animated in conversation and often make gestures. 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 and rolls the eyes. "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 one's fingers instead of words.

Sitting with legs apart is unladylike, and most women ride sidesaddle on the backs of motorcycles. 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. To Dominicans, privacy is unimportant; they perceive the desire for solitude as sadness and equate being alone with being lonely. Sitting in *mesadoras* (rocking chairs) talking or just sharing time is common. Nearly all homes have *mesadoras*. 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 (or passersby happen upon) 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—widows, women who are divorced, women whose husbands work elsewhere, or older women with adult 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. 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 are more common among the educated urban population.

Most families live in small houses, either rented or self-built. They may be constructed of cement, wood, or palm bark. They are brightly painted, have cement or dirt floors, and are covered with zinc roofs. Electricity and running water are luxuries. Affluent urban houses are larger and often have walled and landscaped grounds. Urban apartments are becoming popular, as are newly constructed condominiums.

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 are more closely supervised than boys and often go out in groups. Rural couples might have a sibling tagging along as chaperon. Marriages in the Dominican Republic are often common-law (*por la ventana*), but many couples also marry in a church or civil ceremony. Elaborate urban weddings are major social events.

Diet. If Dominicans do not eat rice and beans at midday, they feel they have not eaten. Most meals feature rice served in large quantities, along with such favorites as *habichuelas* (beans) and *yuca* (cassava). *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. *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, as are bottled soft drinks and sweetened fruit juices.

Recreation. Playing the game of 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 may play at home. Even young children become adept. Cockfighting is another national pastime, and cockfight gambling stakes can be high. The lottery also has high participation.

Baseball is the most popular sport. Competition is keen, 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 accordion), and *guayano* (scraping percussion instrument). *Bachata* is a popular folk dance accompanied by accordions, drums, horns, and *guyanos*. Salsa and other Latino styles are popular, as are North 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).

Holidays. National holidays include New Year's Day, *Día de los Reyes* (Day of the Kings, 6 January), *Nuestra Señora de la Alta Gracia* (Our Lady of High Gratitude, 21 January), 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.

Commerce. Business hours vary, but most establishments open around 8 or 9 a.m., close between noon and 2 p.m., and open again until 5 or 6 p.m. Telephone offices remain open until 10 p.m. and do not close at midday. Banks close by 3 p.m. Most shops are closed on Sunday. Small *colmados* have their own hours. Street vendors are busiest at midday. Bargaining is common in open-air markets, in some owner-operated stores, and on the streets. Prices in supermarkets and elsewhere are fixed.

Family ties and social relationships are important in obtaining employment or doing business. Business arrangements are seldom made between strangers.

SOCIETY

Government. The Dominican Republic is divided into 29 provinces and one national district. The president, currently Hipólito Mejía, and vice president are elected by the people. A bicameral National Congress of 30 senators and 149 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. The environment has suffered from the exploitation of mineral and natural resources, but efforts at conservation are being made.

Among Latin American countries, the Dominican Republic's economic growth has remained strong despite hurricanes and the global economic downturn. However, even though real gross domestic product 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 be impassable during rainy seasons. Public transportation is as varied as a motorcycle ride, a local or long-distance trip in a *guagua* (economical van or bus), or a ride in a larger bus. Pickup trucks or small vans travel between rural villages, carrying passengers, animals, and cargo in a single load. Urban Dominicans travel by *publicos* (public cars), 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 sixth 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

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	94 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	77 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$7,020
Adult literacy rate	84 percent (male); 84 (female)
Infant mortality rate	34 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	64 (male); 69 (female)

called *colegios*. University education is available, and trade schools provide technical training. The adult literacy rate is lower in rural areas.

Health. Public hospitals and clinics provide free care, but private doctors are preferred when affordable. Public institutions tend to be poorly equipped and understaffed. 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 intestinal parasites, dengue fever, and malaria pose serious challenges.

AT A GLANCE

Events and Trends.

- In November 2003, eight people were killed in fights with soldiers during a one-day general strike protesting austerity measures being negotiated between the government and the International Monetary Fund.
- In October 2003, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned that a powder called Litargirio, a common traditional remedy in the Dominican Republic that is imported to the United States, contains dangerous levels of lead and should not be used.
- In April 2003, the country's second-largest bank collapsed amid charges or wrongdoing by those in leadership positions. The failure sent the economy into chaos.
- In July 2002, former President Joaquin Balaguer died at age 95. Thousands came out to honor the man who had dominated the nation's politics for so long.
- Recently, the Dominican Republic has been criticized for its immigration policy. Human rights groups object to the Dominican practice of deporting Haitian illegal immigrants as soon as they are detained. Many Dominicans of Haitian descent are deported before they can prove their citizenship. The Dominican government has agreed to take measures to comply with human rights demands.
- In November 2001 a U.S. jet bound for Santo Domingo crashed in New York, killing all 255 passengers. Three days of national mourning were declared.

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