

# DESTINATION REPORT

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**YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT:** Destinations included in this guide

**Dominican Republic**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dominican Republic - Overview	Page 3
Dominican Republic - See & Do: Sightseeing	Page 6
Dominican Republic - See & Do: Recreation	Page 8
Dominican Republic - See & Do: Shopping	Page 11
Dominican Republic - Dining	Page 12
Dominican Republic - Security	Page 13
Dominican Republic - Facts	Page 15
Dominican Republic - Events	Page 22

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## INTRODUCTION

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Travelers familiar with the Lilliputian scale of the Caribbean's Leeward Islands may be surprised by the Dominican Republic's size. This is not just another tiny Caribbean island with a beach and a straw market. Instead, it's a big country with spectacularly varied scenery that includes the tallest mountains (with elevations of more than 10,000 ft/3,048 m) and lowest point (more than 100 ft/31 m below sea level) in the region; ecosystems that range from desert to cloud forest; stretches of talcum-white sand that run unbroken for miles/kilometers; and the Caribbean's oldest and—some claim—most cosmopolitan city, Santo Domingo. No surprise, then, that the "DR," as it is colloquially known, outstrips all other Caribbean destinations in the number of international visitors by a wide margin.

The Dominican Republic was long one of the Caribbean's more obscure destinations. In the 1970s, a group of investors developed Punta Cana as a beach resort destination unrivaled by any other. Then the Dominican Republic's government began proudly splashing its assets around the world in colorful TV and print advertisements in a determination to elevate the country's name on the list of Caribbean vacation spots.

Evidence of its success is visible throughout the country. Visitor numbers, which top 5 million annually, have soared along with the construction of dozens of world-class, all-inclusive resorts. There's also been an increase in visits by cruise ships to the ports of Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata, Samana and La Romana.

Other improvements can be traced to the pursuit of tourism income: Many of the country's roads have been widened and paved, historic areas in the major cities have been renovated, Santo Domingo has gained an underground metro system, and the nation has gained a new cache among the world's rich and famous as more and more deluxe boutique-hotels, chic resorts, championship golf courses and marinas open.

Although the growth in tourism has eased some of the country's economic troubles, it hasn't ended the desperate conditions experienced by many Dominicans. The unemployment rate is high, and more than a quarter of the people live in poverty—many residing in shantytowns and rural shacks that even visitors to all-inclusive resorts will find hard to ignore.

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## GEOGRAPHY

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At 250 mi/400 km by 150 mi/240 km, the Dominican Republic is larger than any other Caribbean nation except Cuba. It is also the most diverse territory in the region. The Dominican Republic boasts both the highest point in the Caribbean (Pico Duarte at 10,164 ft/3,089 m) and its lowest (Lago Enriquillo at 144 ft/44 m below sea level).

Cacti stud the desert-dry southwest in the lee of mountains clad in cloud forest. The lush agricultural valley of El Cibao lies within a one-hour drive of north coast beaches that abut mangrove-lined lagoons sheltering manatees. The bathtub-warm waters of Samana Bay attract thousands of humpback whales in winter, while nearby Los Haitises National Park is a rugged karst terrain pitted with caves. Drawing the lion's share of tourists, the talcum sands of Punta Cana and neighboring beaches shelve into waters of Maxfield Parrish hues stretching almost to the horizon.

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## HISTORY

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The Dominican Republic was originally inhabited by the Taino people. Their peaceful way of life changed in December 1492, when Christopher Columbus came upon the island of Hispaniola (which is now divided between the Dominican Republic and Haiti). On Columbus' second voyage, in 1493, he established La Isabela, the first Spanish colony in the Americas, near today's Luperon on the north shore. His brother Bartholomew stayed to govern and later moved the capital to what is now Santo Domingo on the south coast.

As the early headquarters of the Spanish Empire in the New World, Santo Domingo flourished. It was the first city in New Spain to build a cathedral and found a university—just two of its many "firsts." Meanwhile, within a few decades of Columbus' arrival, most of the Taino were dead—wiped out by musket, sword and disease.

Spain's influence began to wane in the late 1600s as neighboring Cuba gained prominence, and the Spanish ceded the western part of the island—Haiti—to France. The Spanish, French, British and Haitians continued to battle for control of eastern Hispaniola until 1844, when Juan Pablo Duarte led the movement to establish the Dominican Republic as an independent nation. The early decades of independence were marked by constant civil wars between competing *caudillos* (wealthy, power-hungry leaders) and several Haitian invasions. The government remained in turmoil well into the 1900s, with the U.S. intervening on several occasions. At one point, an annexation agreement was drawn up to make the Dominican Republic part of the U.S. It was ratified by the Dominican Senate but defeated by the U.S. Senate in 1870.

Gen. Rafael Trujillo seized power in 1930. He established a brutal reign that continued until his assassination in 1961. In the mid-1960s, Joaquin Balaguer (a corrupt Trujillo protege) took over as president, serving seven terms (with brief interruptions) until the mid-1990s. His opponents often alleged that his electoral victories were fraudulent, and some consider the 1996 election the country's first fair election.

Recent decades have been marked by a surge in tourism, heavily focused on Punta Cana, where every year sees the opening of at least one or two new megaresorts. Meanwhile, Santo Domingo—second in size only to Havana, Cuba, within the Caribbean—has evolved into a sophisticated metropolis.

Despite extreme poverty throughout the island, the nation has a robust economy. Agriculture continues to be the economic mainstay and sugar is the most important export, but the republic's tobacco industry is also important. The growing tourism revenues, however, have been most important. After the election of former President Leonel Fernandez, the country made major advances and began working to overcome corruption scandals involving high-profile Dominican military leaders and drug-trafficking controversies. The current president, Danilo Medina, was elected in 2012.

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## SNAPSHOT

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The Dominican Republic's foremost attractions are its beautiful beaches and warm tropical waters, historical sites, casinos, golf courses, mountain scenery, national parks, merengue dancing, baseball games, cigars, reef and wreck diving, windsurfing and kiteboarding, and caves full of pre-Columbian art.

Travelers who are interested in resort activities (watersports, golf, tennis), colonial history and Caribbean culture will be happy in the Dominican Republic. Those who would rather not witness conditions in a poor, developing country or who can't tolerate reckless drivers may prefer the Virgin Islands or other smaller Caribbean resort destinations.

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## POTPOURRI

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Where are the remains of Christopher Columbus? It's a matter of debate—either in Santo Domingo or in Seville, Spain. The confusion started in the late 1700s when some bones believed to be the admiral's were sent from Hispaniola to Cuba, then on to Seville. Another skeleton labeled "Cristobal Colon" was later found in Santo Domingo, however, and many experts believe that it's the authentic one. It now resides in the Columbus Lighthouse in the capital. The Dominican Republic government refuses to allow the remains in Santo Domingo to undergo DNA testing.

Lago Enriquillo is the only saltwater lake in the world with resident crocodiles.

Many consider Dominican Republic cigars to be the best in the world, surpassing in quality even those of Cuba, from whose seeds they derive.

The Dominican Republic outranks all other countries in the Caribbean and Central America for producing major-league baseball players, including superstars such as David Ortiz, Sammy Sosa and Pedro Martinez. Many honed their skills in poverty-stricken sugarcane communities around San Pedro de Macoris and La Romana.

Frequent blackouts, sometimes lasting up to 14 hours or more, continue to plague the Dominican Republic. The government even announces them in advance on the radio—sometimes. Many blackouts—*apagones*—are caused when the immensely powerful floodlights are switched on for special celebrations at the Faro de Colon. Many hotels

and restaurants maintain their own generators.

The Taino Indians, who occupied the island before Columbus arrived, believed that their ancestors were spirits that inhabited caverns. Caves were considered sacred places, and the Taino carved *zemis*—effigies of spirits—to guard the entrances.

Dictator Rafael Trujillo was so ashamed of his mulatto blood that he used makeup to lighten his skin.

Three upper-class sisters—Patria, Minerva and Maria Mirabal—were leaders of the movement to overthrow Trujillo. They were tortured and eventually murdered by Trujillo's secret police and are today honored as national heroes known as Las Mariposas (the butterflies).

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## SIGHTSEEING

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The Dominican Republic is a mashup of sights and sounds, best represented by the weekly block party beneath the 500-year-old Monastery of San Francisco. The ruins of the New World's first monastery form the backdrop of live merengue and salsa music every Sunday night, as hundreds dance in the cobblestoned square and drink Presidente beer. Millions go to the Dominican Republic for the striking natural beauty of its beaches and ecology, but historical attractions and vibrant Latin culture form the crux of the country's charm.

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## CASINOS

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Many of the top hotels and resorts in Santo Domingo and along the east and north coasts have casinos. These include the Renaissance Jaragua in Santo Domingo and the American Casino in Playa Dorada, just east of Puerto Plata. The dramatic aquatic-themed Ocean World Casino is a sparkling addition to the mix in the Puerto Plata area.

The minimum gambling age in the Dominican Republic is 18, and major casinos generally accept both U.S. dollars and Dominican pesos.

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## HISTORIC SITES

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The Dominican Republic is rich in historical sites, with the most notable being the Zona Colonial (Colonial Zone) in Santo Domingo. It dates back to the turn of the 16th century and boasts many "firsts," including the first church, first cathedral, first monastery, first convent, first fortress, first paved road and first stone building in the Americas.

Renovated structures include the Alcazar de Colon, once occupied by Christopher Columbus' son, Diego; and the Casas Reales (Royal Houses), which housed Spain's Royal Court in colonial times.

Another major historical site is La Isabela, west of Puerto Plata on the north coast, which marks the first European settlement in the New World in 1493. However, there's little to see there, and the site appeals mostly to visitors with a keen interest in history.

The southeastern city of Boca de Yuma is the site of the one-time house of Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon; it contains suits of armor and other period miscellany.

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## MUSEUMS

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The Dominican Republic offers a number of good museums devoted to local history and culture, especially in the two largest cities, Santo Domingo and (to a lesser degree) Santiago. Many of the exhibit descriptions are written only in Spanish, however. Many tourist venues also have museums displaying amber and larimar exhibits; usually these are adjuncts to commercial jewelry stores.

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## NATURE

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The Dominican Republic has some of the most diverse natural features in the Caribbean: mountains, deserts, seashore, rain forests, cloud forests, mangroves, waterfalls, rivers, caves and lush valleys. The Dominican Republic is home to more than 30 national parks that preserve the country's most treasured mountains, seascapes, forests, deserts, lagoons and other natural features. There are also a half-dozen scientific reserves. Together, they protect more than 25% of the country's total territory.

Several tour operators lead day trips and multiday excursions to explore these natural wonders, many of them headquartered along the north coast or in the mountains near Jarabacoa. Others are a one- or two-hour drive

from Punta Cana and Samana.

Hiking and mountain biking are popular ways to explore the mountains, and horseback riding is widely available.

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## PARKS & GARDENS

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Almost any town or city of any size in the Dominican Republic sports a Parque Central (Central Park), usually marking the middle of town and offering shade and rest to sightseers. However, most are more correctly termed "plazas," as they are usually stone-lined, and vegetation is typically limited to shade trees. Among the most notable is the Parque Central in Monte Cristi, which features an Eiffel Tower-like clock, which was a gift from France.

Santo Domingo harbors a beautiful botanical garden, as well as several large parks popular for picnicking, strolling, jogging and cycling, plus the nation's largest collection of colonial plazas.

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## RELIGIOUS SITES

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Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial is home to a number of historic churches, convents and monasteries (several in ruins) as well as the first cathedral in the Americas: Santa Maria of the Incarnation. The city of Higüey, near Bavaro and Punta Cana, has a dramatic modern basilica noted for its soaring postmodern architecture, which has been both praised and scorned.

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## AMUSEMENT PARKS

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Ocean World near Puerto Plata is a highly successful marine adventure park, where visitors can swim with dolphins and witness sea lion shows and other performances. Santo Domingo has a popular water theme park (Agua Splash) and, nearby, an aquarium; the Punta Cana area features Manati Park, an ecothemed wildlife park with gardens and another chance to swim with dolphins.

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## WINERIES, BREWERIES & DISTILLERIES

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Visitors can see how Dominican rum is made and bottled at the Brugal Rum Distillery in Puerto Plata, although many visitors are disappointed by the limited educational focus, which takes second place to commercial promotion.

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## ZOOS & WILDLIFE

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Santo Domingo's National Zoo is considered one of the best in the Caribbean, and features safari-park-style displays. The National Aquarium offers a chance to see many sea creatures that snorkelers and divers may chance upon beneath the waves. Lago Enriquillo (Lake Enriquillo) in the southwest has resident crocodiles, iguanas and flamingos, and the nearby mountains are renowned as birding sites.

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## RECREATION

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Recreation in the Dominican Republic focuses, not surprisingly, on the outdoors. Beaches and all that comes with them—swimming, boating, scuba diving, surfing and fishing—are the top draw, but golf and bird-watching opportunities are also excellent, and the country has challenging hiking.

Horseback excursions are offered at all the main beach resorts. Horses remain a major mode of transport in rural communities.

Most all-inclusive resorts have gyms, and the larger and more deluxe properties also have spas.

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## BEACHES

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The Dominican Republic has stunning beaches, concentrated along the north and east coasts. They range in color from sugary white to gray and even tangerine. The finest beaches are those of the Coconut Coast (Costa del Coco), stretching virtually unbroken for 30 mi/48 km in the island's extreme southeast. Punta Rucia, the beaches around Las Terrenas and Las Galeras in the Samana Peninsula, and those between Cabarete and Puerto Plata are also exceptional.

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## BICYCLING

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Mountain biking is especially popular in the mountains just south of Puerto Plata and Cabarete; guided trips can be easily arranged in Puerto Plata and other north coast resort areas. The top outfitter is Iguana Mama (phone 809-571-0908; <http://www.iguanamama.com>), which also rents mountain bikes.

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## BIRD WATCHING

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The Dominican Republic is a paradise for birders. The island has some 300 bird species and claims 30 endemics found nowhere else in the world. Migratory waterfowl also flock there, and flamingos and ibis frequent several lagoons. Key sites are Parque Nacional del Este and Parque Nacional Los Haitises, in the southeast; and the Parque Nacional Jaragua and Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco, in the southwest.

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## BOATING & SAILING

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Surprisingly, the Dominican Republic isn't renowned for sailing, despite the existence of several top-class marinas. Hobie-Cats can be rented in Punta Cana, where the Bavaro Splash speedboat safari is a popular excursion. Catamaran excursions depart from most key beach resorts.

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## FISHING

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Fishing isn't a key draw to the Dominican Republic, although exceptional sportfishing can be enjoyed out of Punta Cana and the marina at Casa de Campo. Sportfishing charters operate from both places to the fish-rich waters of the Mona Passage between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. The Puerto Plata area also offers fishing charters in the Atlantic. Many inland lakes are stocked with bass and tilapia. No license is required.

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## GOLF

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The Dominican Republic has more than two dozen world-class golf courses, with an equal number slated to open in coming years. The Pete Dye-designed Teeth of the Dog course, at Casa de Campo, and the Playa Dorada course, designed by Robert Trent Jones, are two of the most challenging courses in the Caribbean. The Faldo Legacy Course is equally challenging and noteworthy for its 1,524-ft/465-m home hole, requiring play across two gaping ocean inlets.

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## HIKING & WALKING

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Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial is pedestrian friendly and best explored on foot. The same holds true for the colonial-era hearts of Puerto Plata and Santiago de los Caballeros. Several national parks offer rewarding hikes along trails ranging from flat and easy to mountainous and challenging. The three-day, round-trip hike to the summit of Pico Duarte, the Caribbean's highest peak, is a rigorous and rewarding journey made by more than 3,000 people per year.

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## SCUBA & SNORKELING

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The Dominican Republic offers superb diving. Numerous Spanish galleons and latter-day wrecks, including some 136 treasure ships, lie in shallow waters rich with coral reefs. Several cenotes (blue holes) offer splendid cave dives for experienced divers.

Dive operators are well-established at all the main beach resorts, and many all-inclusive hotels have on-site dive shops. Diving hot spots include Juan Dolio east of Santo Domingo; Bayahibe, in the southeast; the Samana Peninsula in the northeast; and Sosua, in the north-central region.

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## SURFING

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Strong trade winds along the north coast guarantee tremendous fun for the surf and kiteboarding set. Cabarete is the Caribbean epicenter of windsurfing and kiteboarding, and hosts several key championships every year.

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## SWIMMING

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Most of the beach resorts and upscale urban hotels have swimming pools. The key beach resort areas, such as Punta Cana on the east coast, are protected by coral reefs and have calm, teal-blue ocean waters. More exposed beaches lacking reefs found along some portions of the north coast are usually pounded by high surf, and dangerous rip tides preclude swimming.

*Balnearios* are natural pools, often tree-shaded, where travelers can join locals in cooling off in the southwestern deserts. Some lagoons also make for safe swimming.

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## OTHER OPTIONS

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With caves widespread throughout the country, the DR attracts spelunkers in search of stalactites, stalagmites and pre-Columbian cave drawings. Claustrophobics and anyone afraid of bats, beware.

Canyoning and cascading are relatively unknown but increasingly popular adventure sports in the Dominican Republic, especially along the north coast and in the mountains around Jarabacoa. They involve scaling and climbing or rappelling down canyon walls—or climbing up and jumping off waterfalls—into pools or rivers below. Canyoning generally makes use of safety equipment while cascading shuns it. One of the most popular cascading destinations is 27 Charcos de Demajagua Natural Monument, inland of Puerto Plata.

Whitewater rafting is available in the mountains around Jarabacoa; the most popular run is on the Yaque del Norte, the country's largest river. Rapids vary from class II to class IV, depending on the season.

# See & Do: Recreation

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## SHOPPING

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Shop for local handicrafts, especially colorful Haitian art, wood carvings, ceramics, straw items and some duty-free items (but be selective—perfume usually costs about the same as it does elsewhere). Soapstone carvings—stylized heads and animals—are based on original Taino art. Craft items unique to the country include eerily spectacular carnival masks, and amber and larimar jewelry set in gold or silver. If you're interested in amber, shop around for the best quality and prices, and look out for fake amber: True amber floats in saltwater and glows under an ultraviolet light.

Dominican cigars, considered by some aficionados to be better than Cuban cigars, are widely available. If you'd like to make the comparison yourself, Cuban stogies are sold in the country, too (though it's illegal to take them back to the U.S.). Most towns and beach resorts have cigar stores, and many all-inclusive hotels have a cigar roller in the lobby. The best place to buy, however, is direct from a factory: Most are found in El Cibao, the region east of Santiago de los Caballeros.

Dominican rum (especially Brugal Extra Viejo and Barcelo) and Dominican coffee (Cafe Santo Domingo, in particular) make excellent gifts and both are inexpensive.

Music stores along the pedestrian-only Calle El Conde in Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial sell merengue and *bachata* CDs, allowing you to take home the Dominican Republic's signature sounds. Hundreds of street vendors islandwide sell illegal, bootleg CDs of dubious quality.

Craft markets and stalls are found on all the tourist beaches, as well as in regional markets in towns and cities. One colorful handicraft market area is El Mercado Modelo just north of Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial; its northwest corner is crammed with *botanicas* (herbalist shops). Most tourist hotels also have stores selling at least a modicum of crafts. Bargaining is expected—even mandatory—in markets and even in many shops, though not in larger stores. As long as the price of the item you want is not marked, then negotiate.

Shopping malls in Santo Domingo include brand-name designer outlets, as do the marina at Casa de Campo and Cap Cana.

**Shopping Hours:** Monday-Saturday 8 or 9 am-noon and 2:30-6:30 pm. Stores in modern shopping malls usually stay open all day and don't break for siesta. Family-run operations in areas outside of the cities and major tourist spots have a slightly more varied schedule and are willing to open earlier and close later for people who want to make purchases.

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## DINING OVERVIEW

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No part of the Dominican Republic is without good places to eat. Santo Domingo has dozens of classy restaurants serving everything from traditional Dominican fare to sushi and fusion cuisine. Dominican food is never what you expect. It isn't really Spanish or Creole, and it isn't fiercely hot like some Mexican dishes. But you can taste all those influences as well as others from Africa, India and the Caribbean in the island's cuisine. You'll notice that Dominican food tends to be heavier than most Caribbean fare, largely because of the popularity of mashed starch tubers, included with almost every dish.

A favorite dish is *mangu*—mashed plantains with olive oil or butter and sometimes onion or cheese; it's usually eaten at breakfast. *Mofongo* is similar, but made with plantains, garlic and pork cracklings. The national dish is *bandera dominicana*—shredded beef served with rice, red beans, salad and fried plantains. *Mero* (grouper) with garlic and butter, *lambi* (conch) and *pescado con coco* (fish in coconut sauce) are popular seafoods. Goat meat (*chivo*) finds its way into many dishes.

Meal prices are reasonable, especially in restaurants that only serve local food. Whether you dine as the locals do or feast at resort hotels with fellow tourists, you'll eat well, though you may need to know some Spanish when ordering, especially in restaurants outside the tourist resorts.

If you're hungry between noon and 3 pm, ask for the *plato del día* (plate of the day), which consists of rice and peas or red beans (*arroz con habichuelas*), a salad (usually cabbage, cucumber and a slice of green tomato) and a small meat or fish course—usually made from a home-grown pig, goat, fowl or local seafood. It is often accompanied with some variety of plantain, the cousin of the banana: *platanos* (sliced and fried to a mushy sweetness) or *mofongo*. Such a plate lunch at a typical local restaurant will likely cost less than RD\$200 and will be more than you can eat. Other local dishes to try are *sancocho*, a thick stew with several kinds of meat and vegetables, and *moro*, mixed rice and beans.

In the resort areas, a more upscale meal is likely to include seafood (typically grouper, snapper or tuna) or beef, which is plentiful. (The beef is range-fed in the country's lush interior and is tender and tasty—order only the best cuts.) Lobster and shrimp dishes are staples, at reasonable prices. Wash down your meal with a cold bottle of Presidente, a quality Dominican pilsner that's practically the national drink. The country is also known for its excellent rums, with Brugal by far the largest producer.

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## PERSONAL SAFETY

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Petty crime (theft, pickpocketing) is the biggest danger most travelers will face, though it isn't particularly widespread except in downtown Santo Domingo. Use common sense and take the usual precautions: Avoid unpatrolled beaches after dark and don't leave valuables unattended on the beach or in a rental car. Many parts of Santo Domingo are unsafe, especially at night, when visitors should stick to tourist zones.

Be aware of your surroundings at night and avoid all dark and lonely areas, even in the heart of Zona Colonial, as well as the Malecon after dark. Secure your wallet or purse, especially when visiting public markets. Don't wear expensive-looking jewelry or watches. Caution should also be exercised in some areas along the northern coast, including Las Terrenas, Cabarete, Sosua and Puerto Plata.

The greatest danger by far is on the roads. The Dominicans are deplorable drivers who have little respect for traffic laws, traffic lights, pedestrians or other drivers. The extreme recklessness of Dominican drivers results in a frightening fatality rate. Avoid *motoconchos* (moped taxis) and communal taxis.

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## HEALTH

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Don't drink the tap water. You should even be careful not to let water from the shower get in your mouth. Stick with bottled or boiled drinks, and be careful of any ice that might be in your glass: If you aren't sure it was made with purified water, don't drink it. Take iodine tablets if you expect to purify drinking water while visiting the countryside, where bottled water may be scarce. Hot, freshly cooked food should pose no danger, but avoid any dairy products that might be unpasteurized and wash all fruits with purified water prior to eating them. Hepatitis and typhoid vaccinations are recommended.

Apply insect repellent to protect against mosquito bites. Long pants and closed-toe shoes also are good for extra protection from mosquitoes. Although there is little risk of malaria at tourist resorts, it can be a danger in other parts of the country, especially near the border with Haiti. Consult your physician about malaria treatments if you'll be visiting those areas. Mosquito-transmitted dengue fever is also present in the Dominican Republic.

The parasite that causes schistosomiasis, a disease that can cause fatal liver damage, is present in the country's freshwater lakes and rivers: Avoid swimming in them at all times (chlorinated pools and saltwater are safe). Microscopic parasitic worms also are present in some areas and can enter your body through the soles of your feet. If you feel your hotel or hostel's hygiene standards may not be the best, protect yourself with sandals in the shower. Rabies is present: If you are even nipped by an animal, consult a doctor immediately, and have the animal examined, if possible. HIV is also a serious problem in the Dominican Republic, where prostitution in several tourist resorts is a thriving industry.

It's a good idea to take a doctor's note for any prescription medications you take with you to the Dominican Republic.

Santo Domingo has many U.S.-trained doctors and dentists who speak English. Hospitals and clinics are located throughout the island, though they may be rudimentary. Be sure to take along sunscreen to protect yourself against the tropical sun. Don't forget a comfortable pair of walking shoes.

For more information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

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## DOS & DON'TS

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Do attend a Dominican baseball game if you visit during the professional season (late October-late February). The quality of play is excellent, and it will probably be the most raucous sporting event you'll ever attend.

Do rent a car, if you are brave enough, and explore the Dominican countryside. You'll get a truer view and appreciation of the country by visiting its small towns and rural areas than if you stick to the all-inclusive resorts.

Don't get in a taxi or hire a tour guide without agreeing on a price first, and never hire a *motoconcho* or hail a cab off the street because of the inherent safety risks. Call a radio dispatched cab.

Do learn some Spanish words and phrases and practice them with Dominicans. They'll appreciate your effort.

Do ask a local resident to teach you to dance merengue. Dominicans take great pride in their music and dance—it's a vital part of their national identity.

Don't be in a hurry. Dominicans never are and, as a result, have a reputation of being a bit late for almost everything. Ease into the Caribbean pace.

Do tour one of the cigar plants and watch workers roll cigars by hand.

Do expect to encounter people on the beaches eager to sell you something. A polite "no thank you" and a firm attitude will put an end to any pestering. Be aware that showing even the slightest amount of interest may encourage other vendors to close in and start trying to cut a deal.

Don't get angry or impatient in restaurants if your bill doesn't arrive. In the Dominican Republic, it is considered rude to present patrons with the bill until they ask for it.

Do keep a flashlight handy. Power failures are common, except at hotels and restaurants that have their own generators.

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## Geostats

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**Passport/Visa Requirements:** A valid passport is required to enter the Dominican Republic. No visa is required for U.S., Canadian, U.K. or Australian citizens. A tourist card valid for 60 days may be purchased in advance at a Dominican consulate or—much more conveniently—issued upon arrival at any airport. Carry US\$10 in cash to buy the card (payment is accepted in U.S. dollars only). Buy the card in an airport booth before waiting in the immigration line, and keep it to present upon departure from the country. Travelers may be asked to present proof of onward passage and sufficient funds for their stay. A US\$20 departure tax is also charged upon leaving the country, although this is often included in the price of a plane ticket (charter flights may also include the price of the tourist card). The Dominican Embassy website lists the latest requirements. <http://www.domrep.org>.

All U.S. citizens must now have a passport for re-entry to the U.S. when traveling by air or by sea to or from Bermuda, Canada, the Caribbean (except for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands), Central and South America and Mexico. Citizens of Canada, Mexico and the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda also must have a passport or other designated secure document to enter the U.S.

Reconfirm travel-document requirements with your carrier prior to departure.

**Population:** 10,349,741.

**Languages:** Spanish, English.

**Predominant Religions:** Christian (Roman Catholic), Evangelical.

**Time Zone:** 4 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-4 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

**Voltage Requirements:** 110 volts. Carry surge protection for voltage irregularities.

**Telephone Codes:** 809, countrywide area code; 829 and 849 are recently added area codes being phased in primarily for cell phone and fax numbers, as well as new landline numbers;

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## Currency Exchange

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The Dominican Republic uses the Dominican peso (RD\$) as currency. Paper money comes in denominations of RD\$10, RD\$20, RD\$50, RD\$100, RD\$500 and RD\$1,000. The value of the peso has fallen slightly every year since 2006 relative to the U.S. dollar, with the current rate of exchange around RD\$45 for US\$1.

Traveler's checks may be difficult to cash, except in banks (take your passport); many places won't accept them. Cash advances on credit cards are available in banks, but the process is often very slow (be sure to ask about surcharges for the transaction). ATMs are located throughout the country, but many are often out of order; beware of scams in which "helpful" locals offer to assist you in using an ATM, then steal your money.

U.S. dollars are widely accepted for most transactions in tourist areas and shops. Credit cards are widely accepted in most resort areas and cities, although some establishments may levy hefty surcharges if you use a card—ask in advance. Gas stations don't always accept credit cards.

When traveling to more remote parts of the country, take sufficient cash to make up for lack of ATMs or credit-card acceptance. Don't change more money than you plan to spend, however. Only 30% of Dominican currency exchanged by visitors can be re-exchanged into other currency upon departure (save currency-exchange receipts), which may not exceed \$10,000. Avoid changing money on the black market—the risks of theft and of being conned are too great. (The black marketers are the people shaking wads of cash in various currencies in your face and shouting, "Cambio!") Try to exchange money at a *casa de cambio*, which will offer fair rates.

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## Taxes

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A 16% sales tax applies to most purchases, and often a 10% service charge is added to hotel and restaurant bills.

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## Tipping

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A 10% service charge is normally included in most restaurant bills, but an additional 10% tip may be given if the service is exceptional. Tipping of taxi drivers is not customary, though it is becoming more commonly expected from tourists. Outside of resort areas, tipping is not generally required or expected, except for tour guides. However, many of the people who offer ancillary services or help to tourists live in poverty and a little kindness on your part as a reward for services or help offered can go a long way.

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## Weather

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The best time to visit is November-March, when days are in the 80s F/28-32 C and nights in the 60s F/15-22 C. The rainy season is May-October, although it generally isn't bad enough to rule out a visit unless a hurricane is predicted. (Hurricanes are possible June-November.) The north coast can get rainy in winter as well. The mountains in the western part of the country are considerably cooler, requiring a sweater or jacket during the evening. Constant breezes keep the temperature and humidity fairly tolerable, though Santo Domingo can be extremely muggy in the summer. The southwest desert, while drier, can get extremely hot in daytime.

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## What to Wear

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Dress is casual in most of the country, but certain situations call for more conservative attire—the importance of good dress cannot be overstated. Pack plenty of loose-fitting cotton clothes. If you want to blend in, don't wear shorts in cities and save your swimsuit for the ocean or the pool. Women should cover their shoulders and knees when visiting cathedrals, or risk being turned away; this also applies to men wearing shorts.

If you plan to dine at nice restaurants and visit the nightclubs in Santo Domingo or Punta Cana, be sure to pack some semiformal attire (at least slacks and a collared shirt). *Los dominicanos*, as the residents are known, dress with class when they go out, as much as their budgets allow. Suits and ties and cocktail dresses can be left at home unless you anticipate business meetings, fine dining at classy restaurants, or a night at a classical-music concert.

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## Telephone

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Telephone call centers, operated primarily by Claro (formerly Codetel; <http://www.claro.com.do>), Tricom (<http://www.tricom.net>) and Orange (<http://www.orange.com.do>) are located throughout the country and are much cheaper than hotel rates. Internet centers also offer cheaper rates. Public telephones are widely available and utilize prepaid phone cards, which are sold in most shops and telecommunications centers and in some hotels and gas stations nationwide. Roadside hawkers also sell them. They offer instructions in English and can be used for domestic or international calls. You can also use your long-distance calling card at most pay phones.

Almost every Dominican who can afford one owns a cellular phone. Service is provided by three main companies—Orange, Claro and Tricom—each of which have offices and call centers nationwide. You can buy prepaid SIM cards at these carriers' offices. Global roaming is available, but it is very expensive. Cell phone service is generally good throughout the country, though service in the mountains and remote deserts may be spotty.

The country's primary area code is 809, which is supplemented by 829 and 849, primarily for new cell phone, fax and landline numbers. The three numbers do not delineate distinct regions. To dial a Dominican Republic number from the U.S., simply dial 1, then the area code, and the Dominican Republic phone number. You must dial 1 plus the area code for all calls made from within the Dominican Republic as well, including local calls. Expect to pay



RD\$5-\$10 a minute when calling the U.S., RD\$25 when calling Europe.

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### Internet Access

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The country is well-served by the Internet, with Internet centers in every town and even in many rural communities. Wi-Fi is becoming more prevalent, and most hotels now offer service, either in individual guest rooms or in public areas. Competition keeps prices low—often no more than RD\$60-\$70 per hour. Most hotels have service for guests, often at no cost, although some (especially those with a large business clientele) charge outrageous prices. The Internet suffix for the Dominican Republic is .do. The Dominican Republic is relatively backward, however, in terms of online marketing, and few businesses market their services through websites.

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### Mail & Package Services

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The postal service within the Dominican Republic is unreliable, and is operated by the Instituto Postal Dominicano (<http://www.inposdom.gob.do>). Allow at least 10 days to three weeks for mail to North America and Europe. Postcards and letters to North America cost from RD\$20 to mail, and to Europe from RD\$33. Post offices are normally open Monday-Friday 8 am-5:30 pm. Tourist hotels sell prepaid postcards. Never send any items of value except when using DHL or another reputable courier.

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### Newspapers & Magazines

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The major newspapers are *Listin Diario* (<http://www.listin.com.do>), *Hoy* (<http://www.hoy.com.do>) and *Diario Libre* (<http://www.diariolibre.com>), all Spanish-language. All have events listings.

It's difficult to find English-language news and listings. Many deluxe hotels provide free copies of the *Miami Herald* for guests; others supply brief synopses drawn from *The New York Times*. The best news and information source in English on the Dominican Republic is <http://www.dr1.com>.

The Ministry of Tourism publishes a series of excellent pocket-sized guides to the country and has offices throughout the country. However, the offices are poorly stocked with literature and, in general, staffers are not particularly knowledgeable. Hotels and many shops stock free tourist booklets and sell maps. <http://www.godominicanrepublic.com>.

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### Air

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The island's main international airport, Santo Domingo Las Americas (SDQ), is 15 mi/25 km east of the city. A taxi ride from the city center costs about RD\$1,000 and takes about 45 minutes, depending on traffic. There is no airport shuttle. Phone 809-947-2297. <http://www.aerodom.com/app/do/lasamericas.aspx>.

Santa Domingo's other airport, La Isabela (JBQ), replaced the outmoded Herrera International and handles mostly domestic and charter flights, though it does handle some flights to other Caribbean islands. Phone 809-826-4019.

The privately owned airport at Punta Cana (PUJ) receives nearly two-thirds of all tourist arrivals and now has three terminals. A fourth terminal is planned, although no date has been set for opening. Phone 809-959-2376. <http://www.puntacanainternationalairport.com>.

International flights also land at the airports in Puerto Plata (POP; phone 809-291-0000); Santiago (STI; phone 809-233-8000); Barahona (BRX; phone 809-524-4144); and at the airport in La Romana (LRM; phone 809-813-9000), near the Casa de Campo resort. Shuttle service between La Romana airport and most area resorts is available. The Samana El Catey international airport (AZS) at Sanchez serves the Samana Peninsula (phone 809-338-5888).

For the most current arrival and departure information for flights at Santo Domingo (SDQ), Puerto Plata (POP)

and Punta Cana (PUJ) airports enter the name or location of your airport at <http://www.flightstats.com>.

Because the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration has determined that the Dominican Republic does not provide appropriate oversight of the country's air carriers, Dominican Republic airlines are not allowed to fly to the U.S.

Taxis in Punta Cana range RD\$350-\$1,750 to major area resorts; ask your resort about airport pickups. Rental car companies make pickups at the airport; arrange in advance or call upon arrival.

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## Bus

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Several long-distance bus services operate relatively comfortable, air-conditioned coaches between towns on the island. Less comfortable but more colorful are the *guaguas*—privately owned minivans—that provide service between towns. They usually don't leave until packed to the gills and are most often driven at breakneck speed.

### Capital Coach Line

This Haitian company has new buses and operates daily routes between Santo Domingo and Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Phone 809-530-8266. <http://www.capitalcoachline.com>.

**Address**  
Dominican Republic  
**Phone**  
809-530-8266

### Caribe Tours

This is the country's largest bus company and serves most areas. Phone 809-221-4422. <http://www.caribetours.com.do>.

**Address**  
Dominican Republic  
**Phone**  
809-221-4422

### Metro Expreso

This company operates between Santo Domingo, Santiago and Puerto Plata. Phone 809-227-0101. <http://www.metroserVICIOsturisticos.com>.

**Address**  
Dominican Republic  
**Phone**  
809-227-0101

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## Car

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If you decide to rent a car, expect to pay RD\$1,225-\$5,250 per day. The airports and many of the major hotels have rental offices. In order to rent a car, you need to be at least 25 years of age and have a valid driver's license and a credit card. Be sure to read the insurance policy carefully. Most international companies have franchises, including Budget (phone 809-566-6666), which has offices in seven key tourist areas, including Santo Domingo.

Driving is on the right side of the road (though Dominicans often drive in the middle of the road when passing into oncoming traffic). A working knowledge of Spanish, or at least a dictionary, is very helpful for driving: Signs, though few and far between, are in Spanish. Make sure you know the words you need before getting on the road. More than 10,000 mi/16,000 km of roads crisscross the country. The primary roads are well-paved for the most part; the secondary routes are in iffy shape; and country roads often require a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Tolls (RD\$30) are charged on all of the main roads out of Santo Domingo. Some gas stations close at 8 pm on weekdays and are closed all day on Sunday; some don't accept credit cards.

Be prepared to be flagged down by police for speeding, even if you aren't. Police have been known to want a quick payoff; the going rate is about RD\$500 and up, though they'll often take what they can get. If you do get stopped, be sure to ask for the officer's name and rank and a written citation stating the crime and fine before you pay anything. It's best to do this with a smile. Never hand over your driver's license if you are pulled over for no reason, as this is often held until you pay a bribe. (Corrupt police can be reported to the Internal Affairs Department; phone 809-688-1777.) Note that some scam artists dress up like police officers to shake down tourists for on-the-spot "fines."

Dominican drivers are often aggressive and dangerous, with little regard for laws or fellow drivers. The ruling philosophy on the roads is "dog eat dog." Drive with extreme caution at all times, especially when approaching intersections, as many Dominican drivers do not stop for red lights or stop signs. Watch out for other vehicles, especially the ever-present motorcycles, zipping past and weaving in and out of traffic without regard for the dangers.

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## Ferry

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American Cruise Ferries operates a three-times weekly ferry service between Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo, departing San Juan Monday and Mayaguez Wednesday and Friday. Phone 809-688-4400.  
<http://www.acferries.com>

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## Ship

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Several cruise lines include the Dominican Republic on Caribbean itineraries. In Santo Domingo, the ships dock at either the Sans Souci Pier on the east side of the Ozama across from the Old City or at Don Diego quay just south of the Old City. Puerto Plata, La Romana and Samana are also visited by cruise ships. Carnival recently announced plans to build a cruise port and recreational facility at Maimon Bay, west of Puerto Plata, in October 2015.

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## Taxi

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There are several kinds of taxis. The tan or yellow tourism taxis are the simplest to use and are also the safest and most expensive: They're supposed to be metered, but that's rarely the case—establish the price beforehand. Bargain in Spanish for the best rates. *Carros publicos* are less formal than the tourism taxis. They operate like buses, picking up as many people as they can pack in. While cheap, they are usually driven recklessly and combine a lack of safety with lack of comfort; pickpockets sometimes prey on tourists riding in *publicos*.

*Motoconchos*, or motorcycle taxis, may perch several riders on the back seat. They are not considered safe. Whichever taxi you choose, be aware that rip-offs are common, so don't get into a taxi until you have agreed on a price.

Taxis arranged by telephone often are cheaper and safer than those hailed outside hotels and at the airport. (Unsanctioned drivers may solicit you as you exit the airport; accompany them at your own risk, as many thefts have been reported.) When you call, ask for an English-speaking driver, if available. Keep in mind that you can get a better rate if you use the same driver for several different trips. Drivers are often willing to wait for you while you shop or explore. Be aware that taxi drivers charge by the number of stops they make, in addition to the distance traveled. Always try to agree on the price before getting in and be courteous by not making too many unplanned stops.

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## For More Information

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### Tourist Offices

**Dominican Republic:** Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, Calle Cayetano and Avenida Gregorio Luperon,  
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Government Building D, Santo Domingo. Phone 809-221-4660. <http://www.godominicanrepublic.com>.

**Canada:** Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, 2055 Peel St., Montreal, QC H3A 1V4. Phone 514-499-1918. Toll-free 800-563-1611.

**U.K.:** Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, 18-21 Hand Court, High Holborn, London, England WC1V 6JF. Phone 20-7242-7778.

**U.S.:** Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, 136 E. 57th St., Suite 803, New York, NY 10022. Phone 212-588-1012. Toll-free 888-374-6361.

*The Dominican Republic does not have a tourist office in Australia.*

## Dominican Republic Embassies

**Canada:** Embassy of the Dominican Republic, 130 Albert St., Suite 418, Ottawa, ON K1P 5GA. Phone 613-569-9893.

**U.K.:** Embassy of the Dominican Republic, 139 Inverness Terrace, Bayswater, London, England W2 6JF. Phone 20-7727-6285.

**U.S.:** Embassy of the Dominican Republic, 1715 22nd St. N.W., Washington, DC 20008. Phone 202-332-6280.

*The Dominican Republic does not have diplomatic representation in Australia.*

## Foreign Embassies serving the Dominican Republic

**Australia:** Australia is represented by its high commission in Trinidad and Tobago, 18 Herbert St., St. Clair, Port of Spain (mail address: P.O. Box 4640, St. James, Port of Spain). Phone 868-822-5450.

**Canada:** Canadian Embassy, 39 Capitan Eugenio de Marchena, La Esperilla, Santo Domingo (mail address: P.O. Box 2054, Santo Domingo 1, Dominican Republic). Phone 809-685-1136.

**U.K.:** British Embassy, Edificio Corominas Pepin, Ave. 27 de Febrero, No. 233, Santo Domingo. Phone 809-472-7111.

**U.S.:** U.S. Embassy, Ave. Republica de Colombia 57, Santo Domingo. Phone 809-731-4294 or 809-221-2171. The consular sections are located at Calle Cesar Nicolas Penson at Maximo Gomez in Santo Domingo; Abraxa Bookstore Building, second floor, in Puerto Plata; and Palma Real Shopping Village, Business Center, second floor, Suite 1, in Bavaro.

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## Recommended Guidebooks

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*Adventure Guide Dominican Republic* by Fe Liza Bencosme and Clark Norton (Hunter).

*The Birds of the Dominican Republic and Haiti* by Steve Latta (Princeton University Press).

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## Additional Reading

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*In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez (Algonquin Books). A blend of fact and fiction that examines the true story of three sisters who were murdered in 1960 after plotting to overthrow the Dominican Republic's infamous dictator, Rafael Trujillo.

*Trujillo: The Death of the Dictator* by Bernard Diederich (Markus Wiener Publishers). A fascinating historical account of the life and times of the Dominican Republic's brutal dictator, with a focus on his assassination and legacy.

*Drown* by Junot Diaz (Riverhead Books). Born in Santo Domingo and raised in New Jersey, Diaz offers a

distinctive view of how Dominicans sometimes see their own country from the perspective of a foreigner.

*The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This novel weaves together a compelling account of the events and people surrounding the Trujillo assassination.

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## Calendar

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Dominicans love to dance and party, so there are always festivals going on around the country. Residents of Santo Domingo welcome the new year by gathering along the Malecon to dance to merengue music and watch fireworks on New Year's Eve. The birthday of the country's founding father, Juan Pablo Duarte, is celebrated throughout the nation in late January with gun salutes, flag ceremonies and speeches.

Carnival in February draws more than half a million people to Santo Domingo for a costume parade on the Malecon, dance contests and general merrymaking. Most other cities also hold Carnival parades on the last Sunday of February to mark Independence Day, a national holiday. The liveliest are in Santiago, La Vega and Monte Cristi.

The Santo Domingo Musical Festival showcases classical music every March. Cabarete hosts the International Sandcastle Competition in March and has in previous years hosted the Kitesurf World Championship in June.

The Merengue Festival is held annually in early August in Santo Domingo, coinciding with the anniversary of the founding of the city. On 16 August, Dominicans celebrate the day the country regained its independence from Spain in 1863. Higüey hosts the Festival of the Bulls in August, with traditional rodeo and horse-riding events, drawing cowboys from throughout the region. Puerto Plata holds its own Merengue Festival in late October.

*Bambula*, a writhing dance with African roots, is performed in the streets by costumed dancers in Samana as part of celebrations commemorating St. Raphael. Christmas celebrations last for three weeks throughout the country and include parties and religious services. They conclude in early January.