

## Did You Know?

- The Dominican Republic is the most popular tourist destination in the Caribbean.
- Santo Domingo, founded in 1496, is the oldest European city in the *New World* (Western hemisphere).
- The gentle manatee, or “sea cow,” lives in the waters off the coast of the Dominican Republic and is on the endangered species list. The average adult manatee is about 10 feet long and weighs about 1,000 pounds!
- Many Dominican parents hang a baseball glove over the cribs of their baby boys in the hopes that they will grow up to be good baseball players.
- When a loved one dies, family members and friends gather for a *vela*, or candlelight vigil, at the home of the deceased. They get together to remember the person and to mourn with each other. Another *vela* is held on the ninth day after the death. From then on, *velas* are held once a month for seven months, and then each year on the anniversary of the death.
- Dominicans are great baseball lovers, and some of Major League Baseball’s brightest stars have been Dominicans. Sammy Sosa, the longtime Chicago Cub who competed with Mark McGuire in 1998 for the home run record, is probably the most famous Dominican player. Other stars include Pedro Martinez of the New York Mets, Miguel Tejada of the Baltimore Orioles, David Ortiz of the Boston Red Sox, and the man widely regarded as one of the best players in baseball, Albert Pujols of the St. Louis Cardinals.

## Flag

The red in the Dominican flag stands for the blood of those who died fighting for freedom, blue represents the sky, and white symbolizes the light of the sun. The motto above the coat of arms reads, *Dios, Patria, Libertad* (God, Fatherland, Liberty).



## National Image

*Faro a Colón* (Columbus Lighthouse) is a huge building in the shape of a cross. Its large cross of light can be seen from as far away as Puerto Rico. Dominicans claim the lighthouse contains Christopher Columbus’s remains. They built a shrine to house his tomb, and guards stand around it all day. Spaniards argue that Columbus is actually buried in Spain.



## People and Places

## Land and Climate

The Dominican Republic is the second largest country in the Caribbean. It takes up about two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with Haiti. Hispaniola is part of a group of islands called the Greater Antilles, which also includes Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. The Dominican Republic covers 48,730 sq km (18,815 sq miles), an area just larger than the state of New Hampshire. The climate is *tropical*, meaning that it is generally hot and humid and there are only two seasons: wet and dry. The average temperature in the middle of the summer, the dry season, is 81°F (27°C), while the average temperature in January, in the wet season, is only a little bit lower at 75°F (24°C). Extreme humidity, especially after it rains, makes it feel much hotter than the temperatures indicate.

Most of the land in the Dominican Republic consists of plains, small and fertile valleys, and rugged mountains. The highest mountain range, the Cordillera Central, stretches all the way from Cuba through the island of Hispaniola to Puerto Rico, and the majority of it is underwater! The tallest mountain in the Dominican Republic—and all of the Caribbean—is Pico Duarte. Part of the Cordillera Central range, it was named after the early independence fighter Juan Pablo Duarte. In the Dominican Republic, he is known as the father of the country, similar to George Washington in the United States. The northern and eastern regions of the Dominican Republic are coastal plains, broken up by mountain ranges. Coconut plantations line the coasts, which are covered in beautiful white sandy beaches. The Dominican Republic also lies in the middle of a large hurricane belt, and storms frequently lash the coasts between June and October.

## Population

The Dominican Republic has a population of 9.5 million people. Around one quarter of the population lives in the capital of Santo Domingo. The *Valle del Cibao* (Cibao Valley) is also heavily populated. Nearly three-fourths of the people come from a mixed racial background of European and African blood. About 16 percent of the population is white and the remaining 11 percent are black. There are large populations of Dominicans living in the United States as well. More than one million Dominicans live in New York City, particularly in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan.

Many Dominicans claim to be descended from the Taíno Indians who lived on the island when Columbus arrived, however the Taíno died off so quickly after the Spanish came that very few present-day Dominicans could actually have Taíno blood. In contrast, Dominicans do not like to admit they have African heritage. Much of this dislike stems from tensions between Dominicans and Haitians (who generally have darker skin), and Dominicans are reluctant to connect themselves ethnically with Haitians.

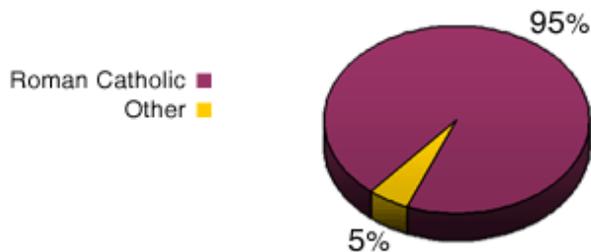
## Language

Spanish is the official language of the Dominican Republic. Dominican Spanish is distinct from other Spanish dialects. Dominicans speak very quickly and frequently drop the *s* at the end of words, saying *gracia* (thank you) instead of *gracias*. The Spanish colonists who settled Hispaniola incorporated many words from the language of the Taíno Indians, who lived there at the time, because there weren't Spanish words for some of the new things the colonists found on the island. Examples include *maco* (frog) and *chichigua* (kite).

## Can You Say It in Spanish?

Hello	<i>Hola</i>	(OH-lah)
Good-bye	<i>Adiós</i>	(ah-dee-OHS)
Please	<i>Por favor</i>	(POHR fah-VOHR)
Thank you	<i>Gracias</i>	(GRAH-see-ahs)
Yes	<i>Sí</i>	(see)
No	<i>No</i>	(noh)

## Religion



Almost all Dominicans (around 95 percent) are Roman Catholic, the religion Spanish colonists brought with them to the New World. An image of the Bible is found on the country's coat of arms. Many Dominicans honor *patron saints* (divine beings who watch over a town or people). Houses often contain images or other artwork depicting the Virgin Mary and other saints. These images are believed to protect the people who live there. Similar images can be found hanging from the rearview mirrors of public buses and taxis for the protection of both the drivers and passengers.

A small Jewish community is located in the town of Sosúa on the northern coast. During World War II, the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo offered Dominican farmland to any European Jews fleeing persecution from the Nazis. Several hundred Jewish refugees settled in Sosúa and set up dairy farms in a land where they would be free from persecution.

## History

### Time Line

4000 BC	
4000–3000 BC	The Arawak people migrate to the island from South America
AD 1400	
AD 1492	Christopher Columbus lands on the island, naming it Hispaniola, meaning "little Spain"



1496	Spanish colonists found Santo Domingo, the first Spanish colony in the Western hemisphere
<b>1600</b>	
1697	The Treaty of Ryswick gives the western part of Hispaniola (Haiti) to France and the eastern part (Santo Domingo) to Spain
<b>1700</b>	
1795	Spain gives Santo Domingo to France
<b>1800</b>	
1808	Spain takes control of Santo Domingo again after a revolt by the <i>Spanish Creoles</i> (people of Spanish descent born in the New World) on the island
1822	Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer sends troops to take over Santo Domingo
1844	Santo Domingo overthrows Boyer and declares its independence, becoming the Dominican Republic
1861–63	The Dominican Republic reverts to Spanish rule
1863–64	A popular revolt causes Spain to leave
1865	The second Dominican Republic is proclaimed
<b>1900</b>	
1906	The Dominican Republic and the United States sign a 50-year treaty. In return for paying off the Dominican Republic's debt, the United States takes control of its customs department
1916–24	The United States briefly occupies the Dominican Republic after a period of internal crisis
1924	U.S. forces withdraw
1930	General Rafael Trujillo overthrows President Horacio Vasquez and makes himself dictator



1937	The army kills 20,000 Haitians living in the Dominican Republic	
1961	Trujillo is assassinated by members of his own army	
1962	Juan Bosch is elected president in the first democratic elections in almost 40 years	
1963	A military <i>coup</i> (takeover) overthrows Bosch and replaces him with a three-man <i>junta</i> (governmental council)	
1965	About 30,000 U.S. troops invade the Dominican Republic after a pro-Bosch uprising	
1979	Two hurricanes leave more than 200,000 people homeless and cause one billion dollars in damages	
1985	There are widespread protests against rising gas and food prices	
<b>2000</b>		
2008	President Leonel Fernandez is reelected	
<b>PRESENT</b>		

## The Taíno

Several hundred thousand Arawak people lived on the island of Hispaniola when Columbus arrived. They had migrated to the island from South America thousands of years earlier. The name *Arawak*, which means "corn meal eater," was not used by the people themselves. They used the name *Taino*, which means "noble." Taíno chiefs could be male or female, and families traced their ancestry back through the female line. They believed that the spirits of these ancestors lived with them in this world, and they worshiped a goddess of *fertility* (the ability to bear children) named Atabey. The Taíno were a peaceful people who farmed the land, raising corn, squash, sweet potatoes, tobacco, and cotton. On hunting outings, they sometimes used deadly blow guns to shoot poison-tipped darts at their prey. The Taíno built small, wooden houses with thatched roofs called *bohios*. Their quiet culture was greatly disrupted by the arrival of European explorers in the 15th century.

## Santo Domingo

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed his ships on a small island in what is now known as the West Indies. The island's geography reminded him of the Spanish countryside he sailed from and so he named the island Hispaniola, meaning "little Spain." Under Spanish rule, the entire island became known as Santo Domingo. As governor of the new Spanish colony, Columbus tried to maintain peaceful relations with the native tribes, but the Spanish colonists treated the mild-mannered Taíno very badly, enslaving them and forcing them to work in gold and silver mines. The colonists then took all the gold and silver for themselves. The Taíno's bodies couldn't fight off European germs since they weren't used to them, and many Taíno got sick. They eventually died out completely. The Spanish colonists began bringing in African slaves to replace the dying native work force. Santo Domingo went on to flourish as a trade capital and destination for explorers. However, pirates and smugglers also found the port city a perfect spot for raiding. Before long, Spain no longer had control over its island colony. In 1697, Spain gave the western portion of Hispaniola to France, and eventually Spanish administrators simply abandoned Santo Domingo to French pirates.



## Revolution and Independence

The French portion of the island was known as Haiti, and as the French took control of the whole island, they brought in thousands of African slaves. By 1801, enough slaves were angry at their awful treatment to rebel against French authorities. François-Dominique Toussaint-Louverture led the French slave revolt and succeeded in setting the slaves free, moving in and occupying the territory of Santo Domingo, and making Haiti an independent nation. The remaining *Spanish Creoles* (people of Spanish descent born in the New World) in Santo Domingo were unhappy under the Haitian occupation, and tensions persist to this day. Napoleon's forces soon overcame Toussaint-Louverture's troops and set up the leadership of President Jean-Pierre Boyer. President Boyer ran the island for over twenty years. Trying to boost economic growth, he passed laws that forced peasant farmers to remain on the plantations they worked and kept them from ever leaving or starting up farms of their own. Boyer also made a deal with France, promising to pay a large amount of money in return for France recognizing Haitian independence. His policies ultimately failed as agricultural production fell even lower, making it impossible to repay the debt to France. Eventually, violent rebellion forced Boyer to flee the country for good.



In 1838, a number of Dominicans formed *La Trinitaria*, a secret society intent on overthrowing the Haitian government. Juan Pablo Duarte, now known as the father of the Dominican Republic, led the revolution. In 1844, *La Trinitaria* seized Santo Domingo and declared independence, renaming the country the Dominican Republic. Unfortunately, Dominicans could not agree on who should run the country. For the next fifty years, the presidency changed hands so many times that the Dominican Republic was not able to achieve political or economic stability.

## U.S. Occupation

In 1905, United States president Theodore Roosevelt worried that some European countries might intervene in the chaotic affairs of Latin American countries like the Dominican Republic and Haiti. To prevent that from happening, Roosevelt signed an agreement with Dominican president Carlos Morales stating that the United States would pay off the Dominican Republic's debt if it was allowed to take over the Dominican customs department, which collects the taxes on goods that go in and out of the country. The U.S. gave 45 percent of the *revenue* (income) to the Dominican government and divided the rest among the nation's *creditors* (people or nations to whom money is due). The experiment was successful and it let other nations know that the United States did not want outside interference in a country so close to its own borders.



More income did not solve the country's political unrest, however. In 1916, after a series of presidents were murdered, the U.S. Marines stepped in to restore order. The U.S. military occupied the country for the next six years, fiercely putting down any resistance at the same time as they trained the Dominican *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard) in tactics and fighting. Much progress occurred during this period, including the reopening of schools and the improvement of public health standards. But by 1920, most Dominicans resented the presence of U.S. forces and tried to reclaim their country. Four years later, they held democratic elections and the U.S. Marines returned home.

## The Trujillo Dictatorship

One of the young U.S.-trained *Guardia Nacional* members was a man by the name of Rafael Trujillo. Trujillo became head of the Guard and, during another period of political upheaval, established himself as dictator and managed to rule the Dominican Republic for more than thirty years. Because the *Guardia Nacional* was so loyal to him, Trujillo was able to strictly enforce his laws. He bribed anyone who disagreed with him or his administration, having them murdered if bribing didn't work. In one instance, Trujillo had 20,000 unarmed Haitian workers killed after the Haitian government captured and executed some of his spies. At the same time, he built an enormous personal fortune by taking over other people's businesses and farms.



Under Trujillo, Dominicans had very little freedom, but the average citizen's day-to-day life improved in some ways. Trujillo rebuilt the capital city of Santo Domingo along with new schools, hospitals, and airports. He paid off the nation's debt and had a reputation for getting the job done. To the outside international community, who were reluctant to interfere with such seeming success, everything in the Dominican Republic appeared to be moving along positively. But in 1960, the world received a wake-up call when Trujillo attempted to have the president of Venezuela killed for publicly disapproving of Trujillo's rule. The United States immediately severed ties with the Dominican Republic.

Shortly after that, Trujillo was killed by members of his own army who were fed up with his cruelty.

## Democracy

An uncertain tradition of democratic elections was finally established in the Dominican Republic in the years following the Trujillo dictatorship. Each president met with varying degrees of success when it came to balancing the rights of the Dominican people with the need for economic growth and political stability. President Joaquín Balaguer served a total of six terms off and on between 1966 and 1996 and presided over much economic growth. Though he followed Trujillo's example by using the military to solidify his power, he also encouraged free elections and peaceful transitions from one president to another.



The country now faces the challenge of rebuilding its relationship with its neighbor Haiti. Many Haitians have come to the Dominican Republic in search of work, some as legal residents and others illegally. But the Dominican government regularly forces thousands of them to return home. There are also frequent attacks on Haitians living in the Dominican Republic because many Dominicans believe Haitians are not as good as them. Furthermore, the Dominican Republic faces the challenge of trying to improve its status as a trading partner and member of the global community.

## Lifestyle

### Games and Sports

Baseball is the national sport of the Dominican Republic. The first baseball leagues in the country were formed in the 1920s. The Dominicans call it *beisbol* and the season runs from October through February. There aren't a lot of grass areas or parks in the Dominican Republic, so kids often play in the dirt of a vacant lot. Many Dominicans have come to the United States to play, while lots of American players practice in the Dominican leagues during the off-season. In fact, the Dominican Republic produces the second largest number of professional baseball players in the world, after the United States. The city of San Pedro de Macorís has a population of just over 212,000, yet it produces a stunningly high number of professional players. For many Dominicans, baseball is seen as their only chance to escape poverty.



The most popular game to play in the Dominican Republic is dominoes, and children learn how to play it at a young age. There are domino tables all over towns, in the parks, in front of shops and restaurants, and in the markets. People can sit down and play whenever and wherever they like. Kids also like to play a game called Thumper, in which they sit in a circle and pick their own hand signal, such as touching a nose or

pulling an ear. The point of the game is to combine long sequences of rhythmic tapping and hand signals. The game stops when someone makes a mistake by forgetting a signal or losing the rhythm. That person must then perform a penalty such as singing in a loud voice or hopping around on one foot. After the penalty, play restarts.

*Canicas*, or marbles, is another popular game. Several marbles are placed in a small circle in the center of a group of players. Players flick or throw marbles at the circle, hoping to knock one of the other marbles away from the group. Each marble that is moved is kept by the player. The player with the most marbles at the end of the game wins.

## Holidays

In the Dominican Republic, *Carnival* (a traditional Catholic holiday that precedes Easter) and Independence Day (27 February, the date Dominicans declared independence from Haiti) overlap to form one huge celebration. Festivities take place each Sunday in February, and people travel from all over the island to join in the activities. Family members make fancy costumes and colorful masks and then dress up together to celebrate. Many people dress up as devils and playfully hit each other with inflated pig bladders or whips. The party winds up in the capital of Santo Domingo with a huge parade on the last Sunday of the month.



## Food

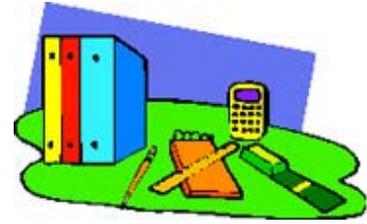
If you lived in the Dominican Republic, chances are good you would eat *plátanos* (plantains) every day of your life. *Plátanos* are a fruit very similar to bananas, except they are not sweet. They taste starchier, like a potato, and they have to be cooked before they are eaten. A common dish is *tostones*, plantains which have been fried, mashed, and fried again, then sprinkled with salt. *Tostones* are similar to French fries. *El almuerzo* (lunch) is the largest meal of the day and usually consists of some combination of rice and beans.



Wealthier families may have chicken or fish with the rice and beans. Dominicans even have a dish named after their flag, *la bandera*. The red and white beans in this dish remind people of the colors of their flag. Dinner comes much later in the evening and often includes eggs. *Quipes* (fried dumplings filled with meat or cheese) are a favorite dish, as well as a soup called *mondongo*, which is made from *tripe* (part of a cow's stomach). Tropical fruits such as guavas, passion fruit, and grapefruit are very plentiful in the Dominican Republic. People, often Haitians, go door-to-door selling fruit. Kids love to drink *batidas* (milkshakes made from milk, ice, and tropical fruits) for a snack.

## Schools

Dominican children begin school at the age of seven and the majority of them continue through the eighth grade. More than half go on to *liceo* (high school) and spend four years studying there. Many children do not attend *liceo* because they can't afford books and other school supplies or because they are needed at home to help on the family farm or to take care of their younger siblings. In the Dominican Republic



there are many private schools, some expensive and some affordable. All children wear uniforms to school. Public school uniforms consist of a blue shirt, beige slacks or a skirt, white socks, and black shoes. Private school uniforms vary according to school colors.

Children attending public school have classes for about four hours a day, either in the morning or the afternoon. Students attending private schools go to class for about six hours each day. In addition to daily instruction in mathematics and science, students take classes in Spanish, history, government, human development, and P.E. Every morning, students sing the *Himno Nacional* (national anthem). Halfway through the school day, students are given a 15-minute break to eat or play. Food offered at lunchtime consists of a full hot lunch (rice and beans) or *merienda* (snacks) and juices. Types of snacks include *quipes* or *empanadas* (bread pockets stuffed with ham and cheese or ground beef), *salchichas* (mini hot dogs), *bolas de yuca* (fried balls of yucca).

The literacy rate in the Dominican Republic is 85 percent, so the majority of the population can read and write. The University of Santo Domingo is the oldest university in the country. Several other universities are owned by the Catholic Church or other private institutions.

## Life as a Kid

As in other countries, the daily life of children depends on where they live and the economic situation of their families. Kids in rural or poorer areas of the country have to get by with less. They don't have as much free time because they have to take care of their siblings, help with chores, or perhaps earn money by shining shoes or selling snacks on the street.



In the bigger cities, Dominican kids are more likely to be involved in sports or other activities such as ballet or *bujutsu* (Japanese martial arts) classes. In their free time, many teenage boys play basketball or baseball. Teenage girls get together and go shopping at local stores and malls or simply spend time together at home. Both boys and girls go to the movies, watch television, listen to music, go to the beach, and chat online at internet cafes.

The fifteenth birthday is a very special event for young Dominican girls. A party, called a *quinceañera*, is arranged. Guests wear formal dresses and suits, and a major banquet is prepared. As part of the celebration, the father kneels down before his seated daughter to slip on her shoe. Afterwards, the two dance together. Then the father gives his daughter's hand to her escort for the second dance. Eventually, the dance floor is opened for everyone to dance.

## Government

*President:* Leonel Fernandez

The Dominican Republic is a *representative democracy*, which means the people elect officials to represent them in the government and look after their interests. A president and vice president are elected by a popular vote to serve four-year terms. The *Congreso Nacional* (National Congress) consists of the *Senado* (Senate) with 32 seats and the *Camara de Diputados* (House of Representatives) with 178 seats. Members of both bodies are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. The voting age is 18. Married people vote regardless of age. Members of the military and national police are not allowed to vote.

## Money and Economy

Agriculture and mining have long been the financial backbone of the Dominican economy. Sugarcane, along with its byproducts (molasses, rum, and plain sugar), is the main agricultural product and has been for years. Sugarcane plantations cover the southern and eastern coasts. The majority of the sugar crop is exported to the United States. Other important exported crops include tobacco (used to make cigars and cigarettes, though few Dominicans smoke) and coffee. These crops are grown in the *Valle del Cibao* (Cibao Valley), between the Cordillera Central and the Cordillera Septentrional mountain ranges. Ever since the Europeans found gold in Hispaniola, mining has been a steady industry in the Dominican Republic. Gold, silver, and *ferronickel* (a mixture of iron and nickel used in the stainless steel industry) are all mined there. The Amber Coast in the north is one of the world's most important sources of *amber* (fossilized tree resin) which is very popular in jewelry.



The Dominican Republic has several free trade zones where businesses don't have to pay as many taxes or fees to set up and make products. These zones attract many new businesses to the country because they can pay workers much less than they would have to in areas without free trade zones. It also means businesses aren't watched as closely by the government. As a result, there are many *sweatshops* (factories which employ people at low wages for very long hours in unhealthy conditions) in the Dominican Republic. In recent years, tourism has become a huge industry because of the country's beautiful beaches and tropical climate. This small nation now has six international airports to handle the millions of tourists and vacationers. The currency is the Dominican *peso*, although the U.S. dollar is accepted in some, particularly tourist, areas.

## Getting Around

The most common forms of transportation in the Dominican Republic are the two-wheeled vehicles: motorcycles, bicycles, and scooters. There is a train system, but it is used mainly for cargo and people rarely travel on it. None of the rail lines connect to the capital of Santo Domingo. There are cheap buses called *guaguas* that run in the major cities. Some of them have a third row of seats that can fold over into the aisle, meaning they can really pack people in! *Carros publicos* are also common in the cities. They are cars that have a letter written on them, and they run on a specific route. *Carros publicos* are quite cheap, but they are often in terrible condition. Still, the drivers cram in as many passengers as possible for each trip. Cars are expensive so many people ride a bicycle or walk.



## Culture Facts & Contacts

### Music and Dance in the Dominican Republic

The *merengue* is a very popular form of music and dance in the Dominican Republic. *Merengue* combines African and European music styles. You can hear the music everywhere. Some of the instruments used in *merengue* include the *tambora* (a kind of drum), the *güiro* (an instrument that looks like a cheese grater), *palitos* (hard wooden sticks), and the guitar. There are very few hours of the day when you don't hear *merengue* blasting from somewhere. *Merengue* is also the national dance of the Dominican Republic. It's a lively and joyous Latin dance style.



Another well-known genre of music in the Dominican Republic is *bachata*. It originated in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s and uses one or two guitars, or a *requite* (a smaller stringed instrument). Other instruments that may be played include maracas, bongo drums, *claves* (hard wooden sticks), and a marimba or *marimbula* (a large thumb bass). *Bachata* is usually played by trios or quartets. *Salsa*, a more sophisticated dance from nearby Puerto Rico, is also popular in the country.

### Learn More

Contact the Embassy of the Dominican Republic, 1715 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 332-6280; web site [www.domrep.org](http://www.domrep.org). Dominican Republic Tourist Office, 136 East 57th Street, Suite 803, New York, NY 10022; phone (888) 374-6361; web site [www.dominicanrepublic.com](http://www.dominicanrepublic.com).

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# Dominican Republic

