

Dominican Republic Directory

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ACCOMMODATIONS

Compared to other destinations in the Caribbean, lodging in the Dominican Republic is relatively affordable. That said, there is a dearth of options for independent travelers wishing to make decisions on the fly and for whom cost is a concern. All the room rates listed in this book are for the high season, which varies slightly from region to region. Sometimes a price range is indicated for those properties where the low- or medium-season rates are significantly reduced – otherwise assume that low-season rates are from 20% to 50% less than high-season rates. More so than other destinations, hotel rooms booked a minimum of three days in advance on the internet are shockingly cheaper, especially so at the all-inclusive resorts the country is famous for, than if you book via phone or, worst-case scenario, simply show up without a reservation.

For the purposes of this book, budget is any room that's US\$40 and under. Most hotels at this level are fairly basic with few amenities, though most will have private bathroom, hot water and 24-hour electricity. Cable TV and air-con are less common, and the latter may not function when the hotel is using its generator. Breakfast is generally not included, and public spaces like lobbies and lounges are either absent or uninviting. You won't feel like you're on vacation necessarily, especially in the cities, but there are a few exceptions, including Las Terrenas on the Península de Samaná and Bayahibe in the southeast, which have several good-value budget options. The DR has no proper hostels, and very little backpacker culture of the sort found in the rest of Latin America, Europe and elsewhere. The few extremely cheap hotels (US\$20 and under) are often either unpleasant or unwise to stay in – the prevalence of prostitution is part of the problem. The walled compounds with names suggestive of intercourse or romantic love on the outskirts of most large towns, especially Santo Domingo, are short-time hotels for couples seeking privacy.

We've used the fairly large range, US\$40 to US\$80 per night, to group accommodation in the midrange category – the majority of hotels in the DR. On the plus side this means that you can find a room with clean linens, air-con, cable TV, off-street parking, sometimes breakfast, internet access and a swimming pool and much more in resort areas, for rather inexpensive rates. However, it also means that you may find rooms with ordinary, sometimes old furniture, fixtures in need of updating and, in the case of all-inclusive resorts, decidedly midrange food. In

BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

PRACTICALITIES

- *El Listín Diario* (www.listin.com.do), *Hoy* (www.hoy.com.do), *Diario Libre* (www.diariolibre.com), *Ultima Hora* (www.ultimahora.com) and *El Nacional* (www.elnacional.com.do), plus *International Herald Tribune*, the *New York Times* and the *Miami Herald* can be found in many tourist areas.
- There are about 150 radio stations, most playing merengue and *bachata* (popular guitar music based on bolero rhythms); and seven local TV networks, though cable and satellite programming is very popular for baseball, movies and American soap operas.
- The DR uses the same electrical system as the USA and Canada (110 to 125 volts AC, 60 Hz, flat-pronged plugs). Power outages are common but many hotels and shops have backup generators.
- The DR uses the metric system for everything except gasoline, which is measured in gallons, and at laundromats, where laundry is measured in pounds.

some places like Santo Domingo, you can stay in restored colonial-era buildings with loads of character with comfortable accommodation for less money than you would spend for a night at a bland international-chain-style hotel. Most have websites where you can make reservations in advance and you can often pay with a credit card, though it's a good idea to check in advance. A good number of all-inclusives, especially outside the holidays and the high season, fall into this category and can be remarkably good deals considering what you get. It's important, however, to keep in mind the peculiar nature of this style of accommodation; see right for more details.

Top-end lodging, US\$80 and up, refers mostly to a handful of upscale hotels in Santo Domingo and Santiago and a good chunk of the all-inclusive resorts. For the former, in addition to all of the amenities listed in the midrange category, you can expect at least one on-site restaurant, shops, a swimming pool, gym, professional service and sometimes an attached casino. All-inclusives at the low end of this category certainly aren't luxurious but you can generally count on better food and service than those charging midrange rates. From US\$200 and up (the ceiling is high for the most exclusive resorts) there's a big jump in terms of the quality of furnishings, food and service, and in the Dominican Republic, maybe more than elsewhere, you truly get what you pay for.

Seasons

The DR has two main high seasons – from December to March, when Canadians and Americans do most of their traveling, and from July to August, when many Europeans

and Dominicans are on holiday. *Semana Santa* (Holy Week, ie the week before Easter) is also an extremely busy time, as all local schools, universities, government offices and many businesses are closed and Dominicans flock to beaches and riverside areas. Carnival is celebrated every weekend in February, and hotels can fill up in the most popular areas, like La Vega, Santiago and Santo Domingo. During all these times expect prices to rise by about one-third. Reservations are recommended during these periods, especially at beach areas, and you may have less luck bargaining for a reduced rate. No matter what season, weekend and weekday rates are generally uniform, but always ask for a discount if you'll be staying for more than a couple of days.

All-Inclusive Resorts

Easily the most popular form of lodging in the DR is the all-inclusive resort. In some people's minds they're synonymous with tourism here and for good reason – much of the prime beachfront property throughout the country is occupied by all-inclusives. The largest concentrations are at Bávaro/Punta Cana in the east and Playa Dorada in the north, though their numbers are growing in areas around Bayahibe, Río San Juan, Sosúa and Luperón. Boca Chica and Juan Dolio, both within easy driving distance of Santo Domingo, have small concentrations as well. Because of its relative inaccessibility, the *Península de Samaná* was largely free of all-inclusives until recently; a handful are in operation now and more are likely in the near future.

If you're looking for a hassle-free vacation, it's easy to understand the appeal of the

SORTING THROUGH ALL THE ALL-INCLUSIVES

Consider the following questions if you're trying to choose an all-inclusive resort:

- Location: What part of the country is the resort in? What sights are nearby?
- The fine print: Are all the restaurants included? How about alcoholic beverages? Motorized water sports?
- Ocean front: Is the resort on the beach, across the street, a bus ride away?
- Size of the resort: Do you need to rent a golf cart to get from your room to the buffet?
- Variety of restaurants: Do you have options other than the same old buffet?
- Accommodations: When were the rooms last updated?
- Children: Is this a kid-friendly resort? Is there a kids' club? Babysitting service?
- Pools: How many pools are there? Is loud music piped in the pool area all day?
- Drinks: Is top-shelf alcohol included? What about bottled beer?
- Entertainment: Are there nightly performances or live-music venues? How about a disco?

all-inclusive. Everything you could want, from food and drink to activities and entertainment, are all available in a single self-contained destination. The majority offer at least one all-you-can-eat buffet and several stand-alone restaurants (these sometimes require reservations once you've arrived and sometimes cost extra) and food is usually available virtually around the clock. Drinks (coffee, juice, soda, beer, wine, mixed drinks) are also unlimited and served up almost 24/7 from restaurants, beach and pool bars, cafés, discos etc. Most are located on the beach and have lounge chairs and towels, as well as several pools. A variety of tours are on offer daily, including snorkeling, diving, trips to parks and sights in the surrounding area, city tours and horseback riding. If there isn't a golf course on the property, no doubt the concierge can arrange a tee time. The average stay at an all-inclusive leaves little time or room to explore or learn much about the country or its people, but it does make for a relaxing and indulgent week.

Several companies dominate the resort landscape in the Dominican Republic. Names like Melia, Barcelo and Wyndham are plastered on signs everywhere from Puerto Plata to Bávaro. Often there will be several Melias, Barcelos or Wyndhams in the same area, ranging widely in terms of quality and costs – it can get confusing. While choosing the best resort for you or your family requires some homework, it's well worth the effort. Too often people's vacations are ruined by unrealistic expectations fostered by out-of-focus photos and inaccurate information found

online. And if it's your first time visiting the Dominican Republic, it's difficult to have a sense of the geography of the area you're considering. For example, the Bávaro/Punta Cana region is quite large, and while some resorts are within walking distance of one another and local restaurants and shops, others are isolated and without a rental vehicle you might end up feeling stranded. Websites like **dr1.com** (www.dr1.com) and **Debbie's Dominican Republic Travel Page** (www.debbiesdominicantravel.com) can be useful: posting detailed, first-person reviews from travelers who have stayed recently at various resorts.

All-inclusive resorts, per person, range from solidly midrange to luxury top end. Cable TV, hot water, 24-hour electricity and air-con are standard. More expensive resorts generally have better buffets and one or more à la carte restaurants, and food quality is one of the most obvious and significant reasons to spend a few more bucks. More expensive resorts also tend to have nicer and larger pool areas and prime beachfront locations. Unless you're paying top dollar, odds are room furnishings and mattress quality won't be highlights. Loud, throbbing dance music is commonly piped in the pool and beach areas – whether this is a plus or minus is an important determining factor in where you stay.

Camping

Other than the none-too-appealing free cabins en route to Pico Duarte, there are no formal campgrounds and the whole idea of camping is peculiar to a majority of Dominicans. If

you are dead set on sleeping in a tent, you'll have the most luck in rural mountain areas or along deserted beaches – inland, you should ask the owner of the plot of land you are on before pitching a tent, and on the beach ask the Politur (tourist police) or local police if it is allowed and safe.

Rental Accommodations

If you'll be in the Dominican Republic for long – even a couple weeks – renting an apartment can be a convenient and cost-effective way to enjoy the country. There are a number of homes that can be rented by the week or month; alternatively, look for 'apartahotels,' which have studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments, usually with fully equipped kitchens. This book lists a number of apartahotels in areas where long-term units are popular, such as Cabarete (p189). A number of hotels have a small amount of units with kitchens – such cases are also indicated in the listings.

ACTIVITIES

For many people, a trip to the Dominican Republic equals lazy days spent doing nothing on the beach. This certainly is an option, but there's also a wide range of sports and ecoactivities, enough to leave little time for sunbathing, for those looking for more excitement and activity. Because of its geographic diversity and relatively small size, it's possible to combine everything from mountaineering to snorkeling and kitesurfing in a single vacation. Many of the sports and activities listed here are covered in more detail in the Dominican Republic Outdoors chapter (p59).

Diving & Snorkeling

The Dominican Republic has excellent and varied options for diving and snorkeling. Because it has the Caribbean to the south and the Atlantic to the north and east, the DR offers divers and snorkelers a number of distinct underwater environments and conditions. The southern coast faces the Caribbean and the water is typically warmer and clearer here than anywhere else. It's best reached using dive shops in Boca Chica and Bayahibe. The north coast has cooler Atlantic waters with somewhat less visibility, but makes up for that with more varied underwater formations. You can explore this area from Las Galeras, Las Terrenas, Río San Juan and Sosúa, all of which have recommended dive shops. A bit off the

beaten path are the diving and snorkeling opportunities in the northwest, specifically Monte Cristi – the national park of the same name there has the DR's most pristine coral formations – and the small fishing village of Punta Rusia. The DR also has two cave dives – one near Río San Juan can be done by skilled divers with just Open Water certification, while the second, deep inside Parque Nacional del Este, is for advanced cave divers only.

Golf

Known as one of the premier golf destinations in the Caribbean, the DR has more than two dozen courses to choose from. Signature courses by high-profile designers like Tom Fazio, Robert Trent Jones Sr, Pete Dye, Jack Nicklaus, Nick Faldo and Arnold Palmer are being built at a steady pace. The majority are affiliated with (or located nearby) the top all-inclusive resorts, but are open to guests and nonguests alike. Many consider Teeth of the Dog at the Casa de Campo resort near La Romana the finest course in the country. Almost all take advantage of their Caribbean setting (of course, this means many were built on former mangrove areas) and feature fairways and greens with spectacular ocean views. Green fees range from under US\$30 to over US\$200, plus caddie and/or cart fees. Reservations are essential in the high season at the top courses. Green fees are reduced when booked through many hotels and resorts, and golf vacation packages are available.

Hiking

The Caribbean, a region not known for its high peaks, isn't generally considered a hiking destination, so many people are surprised by the wealth of opportunity in the Dominican Republic. Pico Duarte, at 3087m, the tallest peak in the Caribbean, is the most obvious choice; it's challenging aerobically, though not technically, and while the scenery along the ascent isn't especially stunning, the views from the top are worth the effort. If you're not up for the summit, the highland town of Jarabacoa, where many hikes begin, has several rewarding circuits to area waterfalls. In the southwest there are several recommended hikes best done on a tour, and coastal walks in the Península de Samaná (especially Las Galeras), which end at beautiful isolated beaches.

Mountain Biking

Road cycling in the DR is a challenging, even dangerous, activity, whereas mountain bikers avoid the number one hazard – cars. Organized tours cover the miles of back roads and dirt paths in the central highlands and the north and southwest. Iguana Mama in Cabarete (p188) is without question your best bet; trips can be customized for just about any length or skill level. There are also tours and bike rentals in Las Galeras and Las Terrenas in the Península de Samaná. With a good map, Spanish-speaking skills and a definite sense of adventure, it's possible to head out on your own.

River Rafting

Jarabacoa is the jumping-off point for trips down the Dominican Republic's longest river, the Río Yaque del Norte. While relatively mild as white-water adventures go, this portion of the river does have some nice rolls and rapids as it winds through an attractive gorge, making it a fun half-day excursion.

Surfing

Cabarete, better known as a place to go windsurfing and kiteboarding, is also one of the country's best places for surfing. In fact, there are great breaks to be found all along the north coast. In addition to Cabarete, there are some good spots west of Sosúa and east of Río San Juan, near Playa Caletón and Playa Grande, and Playa Bonita near Las Terrenas in the Península de Samaná.

Whale-Watching

From mid-January to mid-March the Samana Bay becomes the whale-watching capital of the Caribbean. In fact, they come in such high numbers and with such regularity that the DR is considered one of the best places in the world to observe humpbacks (see p145). Most tours depart from the town of Samaná, and guests are treated to numerous sightings, sometimes at very close range. Reservations are a good idea – the tours are very popular and the season overlaps with Carnival and Independence Day.

Wind Sports

The DR is one of the top places in the world for windsurfing and kiteboarding, and the wind blows hardest in Cabarete, which hosts major annual competitions in both sports and

has numerous schools for those who want to learn. Las Terrenas on the Península de Samaná, a growing destination for enthusiasts for both windsurfing and kiteboarding, has good conditions for much of the year. Most people need a minimum of six hours' instruction to pick up kiteboarding, but nine or 12 hours is recommended. The basics of windsurfing can be grasped in a few hours, though it is a sport that takes months or years to master. Cabarete is also an excellent place for sailing.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks are typically open from 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm Saturday, but almost all of them offer 24-hour ATM access. Government offices keep short hours – 7:30am to 2:30pm Monday to Friday. Stores and shopping malls tend to open from 9am to 7:30pm Monday to Saturday and supermarkets from 8am to 10pm Monday to Saturday. Restaurants keep the longest hours, typically staying open from 8am to 10pm or later Monday through Saturday, although most close between lunch and dinner. Liquor-licensing laws, and hence bar opening and closing times, were in flux at the time of research; however, you can expect bars, nightclubs and casinos to be open from 6pm to late or until the early morning. Internet cafés and call centers are open 9am to 6pm Monday to Saturday and also half-days on Sunday. Most tourist attractions, tour operators and car-rental agencies are open from 9am to 6pm (or later) daily, although museums, galleries and some historical monuments may close one weekday, usually Monday.

CHILDREN

All-inclusive resorts can be a convenient and affordable way for families to travel, as they provide easy answers to the most vexing of travel questions: When is dinner? Where are we going to eat? What are we going to do? Where's the bathroom? Can I have another Coke? For independent-minded families the DR is no better or worse than most countries – its small size means no long bus or plane rides, and the beaches and outdoor activities are fun for everyone. At the same time, there are few kid-specific parks or attractions, and navigating the cities can be challenging for parents and exhausting for children.

Practicalities

All-inclusive resorts have the best child-specific facilities and services, from high chairs in the restaurants to child care and children's programming. That said, not all resorts cater to families with young children, so be sure to choose a place that does. Independent travelers will have a harder time finding facilities designed for children and few smaller restaurants will have high chairs.

Child safety seats are not common, even in private cars, and are almost unheard of in taxis or buses. Seatbelts are required by law, however, so if you bring your own car seat – and it's one that can adapt to a number of different cars – you may be able to use it at least some of the time.

Breast-feeding babies in public is not totally taboo, but nor is it very common. It is definitely not done in restaurants, as in the US and some other countries. If necessary, nursing mothers should find a private park bench and use a shawl or other covering. Major grocery stores sell many of the same brands of baby food and diapers (nappies) as in the US. For excellent general advice on traveling with children, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children*.

Sights & Activities

Some places in the DR are better suited for kids than others. Santo Domingo, while big and busy, does have a number of sights kids will like (p89), including a terrific children's museum, an interesting colonial-era fort, a huge botanic garden and an aquarium.

The central highland town of Jarabacoa has a plethora of outdoors activities suitable for hardy children, including hiking, horseback riding and river-rafting.

A number of schools in Cabarete on the north coast give safe and reliable wind-surfing and kiteboarding lessons to kids. Cabarete also has some good tour operators with a number of fun, outdoorsy options for children.

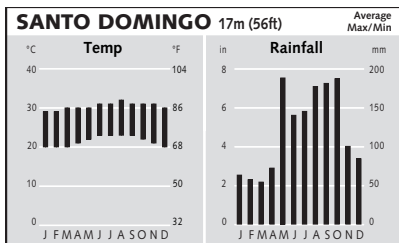
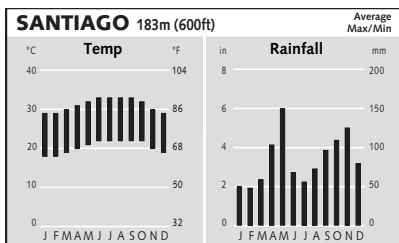
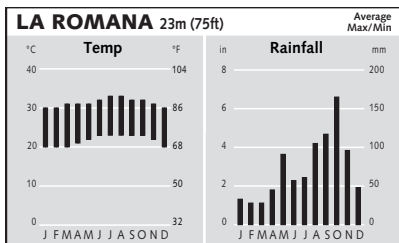
Samaná offers whale-watching tours from mid-January to mid-March, amazing excursions even for jaded teenagers.

And, of course, the all-inclusive resorts at Bávaro and Punta Cana are excellent for children and families, with myriad activities and programs for young people of all ages. Outside of Bávaro and Punta Cana, the resorts in Playa Dorada and Luperón have large

beaches and mild surf, an easy-to-reach marine park, and good outdoor excursions in the nearby mountains.

CLIMATE CHARTS

Looking at the accompanying charts, it's not hard to see why the Dominican Republic is sometimes said to have an 'eternal summer.' Month to month, region to region, temperatures remain fairly steady. Rainfall varies much more and travelers should note that although it's a small country, the rainy season peaks in different months in different parts of the country. In Santo Domingo, summer is the rainy season, with strong daily rains from May to October. The north coast's rains generally come later, beginning around October and sometimes lasting until March. Samaná is the wettest region, with on and off rain most of the year (February and March are the driest months). The southeast is much drier, and the



southwest even drier still – in both areas the months from May to October have the most rain. But like many places in the tropics, rain storms in the DR tend to be heavy but last only an hour or so.

Hurricane season, roughly August to October (though storms can occur in November and even December), can bring intense rain storms and the occasional hurricane, which typically affect the eastern part of the country. The big ones don't hit every year, though they are becoming more frequent – 2007 was a particularly tough year, as the country was devastated by Tropical Storm Noel and then later in mid-December by Tropical Storm Olga (see boxed text, p36). Of course, sunny days outnumber stormy ones, even in hurricane season – as long as a storm doesn't hit, it can be a pleasant and affordable time to travel.

CUSTOMS

Customs regulations are similar to most countries, with restrictions on the import of live animals, fresh fruit or vegetables, weapons and drugs, and the export of ancient artifacts and endangered plants or animals.

Other than the obvious, like weapons and drugs, there are only a few specific import restrictions for foreigners arriving in the Dominican Republic. Visitors can bring up to 200 cigarettes, 3L of alcohol and gifts not exceeding US\$100 duty-free. It's best to carry a prescription for any medication, especially psychotropic drugs.

It is illegal to take anything out of the DR that is over 100 years old – including paintings, household items and prehistoric artifacts – without special export certificates. Mahogany trees are endangered and products made from mahogany wood may be confiscated upon departure. Black coral is widely available and, although Dominican law does not forbid its sale, international environmental agreements do – avoid purchasing it. The same goes for products made from turtle shells and butterfly wings – these animals are facing extinction. It is illegal to export raw unpolished amber from the DR, though amber jewelry is common and highly prized.

Most travelers run into problems with the export of cigars, and it's not with Dominican customs as much as their own. The USA allows its citizens to bring up to 100 cigars duty-free. Canada and most European coun-

tries only allow 50 cigars before duty taxes kick in.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The Dominican Republic is not a particularly dangerous place to visit. Street crime is rare in most tourist areas, especially during the day, but you should always be alert for pick-pockets and camera snatchers. Avoid walking on beaches at night, and consider taking a cab if you're returning home late from clubs and bars. Prostitution is dangerous mainly to those participating in it, although solo men may get annoyed by persistent propositioning and some readers have reported being pick-pocketed by prostitutes. See p344 for information on reporting child prostitution in the DR. Car theft is not unheard of – this author had his rental vehicle stolen from right in front of his hotel in Boca Chica – so it's best to not leave any valuables inside your car.

Perhaps the number one annoyance is not being given the proper change after a purchase. In many cases it is a legitimate error in math. But it's not entirely uncommon for waiters, taxi drivers and shop owners to 'accidentally' give you 120 pesos when you're owed 220. If something's missing, say so right away.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies vary greatly in terms of the services they offer to their citizens. That said, citizens should not hesitate to contact their embassy for help; at the very least, they can direct you to appropriate third-party agencies or services. All of the following are located in Santo Domingo.

Canada (Map p77; ☎ 809-685-1136; sdgo@dfai-maeci.gc.ca; Av Eugenio de Marchena 39)

Cuba (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-537-2113; Calle FP Ramírez 809)

France (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-687-5270; www.amba-france-do.org; Calle Las Damas 42)

Germany (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-542-8949; Torre Piantini, 16th fl, Av Gustavo A Mejía Ricart)

Haiti (Map p77; ☎ 809-686-5778; Calle Juan Sánchez Ramírez 33)

Italy (Map p77; ☎ 809-682-0830; Calle Rodríguez Objio 4)

Japan (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-567-3365; Torre BHD office Bldg, 8th fl, cnr Calle Luis Thomen & Av Jiménez Moya)

Netherlands (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-565-5240; Mayor Enrique Valverde)

Spain (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-535-6500; Torre BHD office Bldg, 4th fl, cnr Calle Luis Thomen & Av Jiménez Moya)

UK (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-472 7111; Av 27 de Febrero 233)

USA (Map p77; ☎ 809-221-2171; www.usemb.gov.do; cnr Av César Nicolás Penson & Av Máximo Gómez)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

February

CARNIVAL

Carnival (or Carnaval, in Spanish) is celebrated with great fervor throughout the country every Sunday in February, culminating in a huge blow out in Santo Domingo on the last weekend of the month or the first weekend of March. Almost every major city (and many minor ones) has Carnival celebrations, each lending unique twists and traditions to the event. Masks and costumes figure prominently in all – Santiago even hosts an international *caleta* (Carnival mask) competition, and the craftsmanship is truly astounding. The largest and most traditional Carnivals outside of Santo Domingo (p90), all of which are held in February or March, are celebrated in Santiago (p209), Cabral, Monte Cristi and La Vega (p223).

INDEPENDENCE DAY

The Dominican Republic declared its independence from Spain in November 1821, but only a year later submitted to Haitian rule to avert reinvasion by Spain (or else Haiti itself). February 27 is the day, in 1844, that the DR regained independence from its neighbor, making it the only Latin American country whose independence celebration does not mark a break from European colonial rule. The day is marked by street celebrations and military parades.

March

SEMANA SANTA

Any place that has access to water – mainly the beach towns, but also those near lakes, rivers or waterfalls – is thoroughly inundated with Dominican vacationers during ‘Holy Week,’ the biggest travel holiday in the country and much of Latin America. Many foreign travelers may find the crowded beaches, innumerable temporary food stands and loud music day and night a bit off-putting. Others, including most Dominicans, revel in the lively atmosphere. However, most water sports are prohibited during Semana Santa, including scuba diving and windsurfing. Inland is somewhat less crowded than the beaches, but make reservations early, no matter where you end up.

June

PUERTO PLATA CULTURAL FESTIVAL

This weeklong festival brings merengue, blues, jazz and folk concerts to the Puerto Plata’s Fuerte San Felipe at the end of the Malecón. Troupes from Santo Domingo perform traditional songs and dances, including African spirituals and famous salsa steps.

July–August

SANTO DOMINGO MERENGUE FESTIVAL

Santo Domingo hosts the country’s largest and most raucous merengue festival. For two weeks at the end of July and the beginning of August, the world’s top merengue bands play for the world’s best merengue dancers. While the Malecón is the center of the action, you’ll find dance parties in hotel ballrooms and private terraces, on city squares and public parks, and in restaurants and makeshift bars throughout town.

October

PUERTO PLATA MERENGUE FESTIVAL

The country’s other merengue festival is held in Puerto Plata during the first week of October. The entire length of Puerto Plata’s Malecón is closed to vehicular traffic. Food stalls are set up on both sides of the boulevard and famous merengue singers perform on a stage erected for the event. This festival is different from the one in Santo Domingo in that it also includes a harvest festival and an arts-and-crafts fair.

LATIN MUSIC FESTIVAL

This huge, annual three-day event – held at the Olympic Stadium in Santo Domingo – attracts the top names in Latin music, including jazz, salsa, merengue and *bachata* (popular guitar music based on bolero rhythms) players. Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, Enrique Iglesias and salsa king Tito Rojas have been featured in the past.

FOOD

Some visitors to the Dominican Republic never experience a meal outside of their all-inclusive resort and when all the food you can eat is calculated into the room price, eating can seem like a bargain. For travelers hoping to eat out on their own, food can be surprisingly expensive. Of course, prices tend to be much higher in heavily touristy areas, such as the Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo

(comparable to US and European prices), and cheaper in small towns and isolated areas. However, outside of informal food stands and cafeteria-style eateries, a meal without drinks at most restaurants will cost a minimum of \$6. Many restaurants have a range of options, from inexpensive pizza and pasta dishes to pricey lobster meals. The listing categories in this book refer to the cost of a main dish with tax: budget (less than US\$5), midrange (US\$5 to US\$15) and top end (US\$15 and above). For more information on food and drink in the DR, see p66.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

As a whole, the Dominican Republic is quite open about heterosexual sex and sexuality, but still fairly closed-minded about gays and lesbians. Gay and lesbian travelers will find the most open community in Santo Domingo, though even its gay clubs are relatively discreet. Santiago, Puerto Plata, Bávaro and Punta Cana also have gay venues, catering as much to foreigners as to locals. Everywhere else, open displays of affection between men or women are rare and quite taboo. Two men may have trouble getting a hotel room with just one bed, even though you'll pay more for a room with two. Two good websites with gay-specific listings and information for the Dominican Republic are **Guia Gay** (www.guiagay.com, in Spanish) and **Planetout.com** (www.planetout.com).

HOLIDAYS

Other than Samana Santa, most holidays should not disrupt your travel plans much – banks, government offices and some museums and galleries may be closed, and parades (especially on Independence Day) can block traffic. Carnival processions are held every weekend in February and are a highlight of any trip to this holiday-happy island.

New Year's Day January 1

Epiphany/Three Kings Day January 6

Our Lady of Altigracia January 21

Duarte Day January 26

Independence Day, Carnival February 27

Semana Santa March/April

Pan-American Day April 14

Labor Day May 1

Foundation of Sociedad la Trinitaria July 16

Restoration Day August 16

Our Lady of Mercedes September 24

Columbus Day October 12

UN Day October 24

All Saints' Day November 1

Constitution Day November 6

Christmas Day December 25

INTERNET ACCESS

The Dominican Republic has no shortage of internet cafés, where high-speed broadband connections are increasingly the norm, as well as CD burners, high-speed USB compatibility, even webcams for phone and chat programs. Most cafés charge US\$1 to US\$4 per hour to access the internet, more for additional services like printing or burning CDs. Rates can be higher in resort areas. Most of these cafés also operate as call centers.

Wi-fi access is becoming more and more prevalent, especially in top-end hotels and resorts throughout the country. Travelers with laptops won't have to go far before finding some place with a signal. However, the majority of the all-inclusives charge daily fees (around US\$12) for access. Many others that offer the service free for guests only have a signal in public spaces like the lobby or the café and not in guest rooms. Certain towns, Las Terrenas on the Península de Samaná for example, tend to be more connected than others and many hotels here, the majority midrange, offer free wi-fi access for guests.

LAUNDRY

Most laundromats and hotels in the DR charge per piece, which adds up very fast. Expect to pay US\$0.75 to US\$1.50 per piece, for even underwear and T-shirts. Some charge by the load, rather than by the pound or kilo – a load is usually up to 14lb (sometimes 18lb), and can cost US\$2 to US\$7. Same-day service is usually available if you drop your clothes off early.

LEGAL MATTERS

The Dominican Republic has two police forces – the Policía Nacional (national police) and the Policía Turística (tourist police, commonly referred to by its abbreviation 'Politur'). The Policía Nacional are not as corrupt and unreliable as their counterparts in other Latin American countries, but you still want to have as little interaction with them as possible. If a police officer stops you, be polite and cooperate. They may ask to see your passport – you're not required to have it on you, but it's always a good idea to carry a photocopy.

Politur officers, on the other hand, are generally friendly men and women whose job is specifically to help tourists. Many speak a little bit of a language other than Spanish. They wear white shirts with blue insignia and can usually be found near major tourist sights and centers. You should contact Politur first in the event of theft, assault or if you were the victim of a scam, but you can equally ask them for directions to sights, which bus to take etc. Many cities have a Politur station, which you will find listed in the destination chapters throughout this book.

Prostitution is big business in the DR. Tourists picking up willing men or women is common and, evidently, there is no law that is enforced against it, even if money changes hands. But there is no law expressly legalizing prostitution, either. It is definitely illegal to have sex with anyone under the age of 18, even if the offender didn't know the prostitute's real age. Encouraging or aiding prostitution is illegal, and the law, while targeted at pimps or brothel owners, is obviously open for some interpretation. In fact, the Dominican consulate will tell you that prostitution in all forms is illegal. In any case, walking the line between what is legal and illegal, especially as a forger, is definitely risky.

MAPS

If you rent a car, it's worth buying a good map to the area you'll be driving in. You should also get in the habit of asking directions frequently. Not only will this prevent you from getting off track, but it's also a good time to ask about road conditions – in some cases rain or construction have made the roads very difficult to pass, especially if you're driving a compact car. The easiest way to ask directions if you're going to, say, Punta Rusia is to ask '¿Para Punta Rusia?', literally 'For Punta Rusia?' To ask about conditions, you can say '¿El camino está bien o malo?' (Is the road good or bad?) or '¿Se puede pasar mi carro?' (Will my car be able to pass?). Of course, understanding the directions you're given is half the battle; some key words to listen for are *derecho* (straight), *derecha* (right), *izquierdo* (left), *desvío* (turnoff), *letrero* (sign), *mucho pozo* or *mucha olla* (lots of potholes or holes) and *vaya preguntando* (ask along the way).

In Santo Domingo, **Mapas GAAR** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-688-8004; www.mapasgaar.com.do; Español;

☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri) publishes and sells the most comprehensive maps of cities and towns in the DR. Borch produces a high-quality map of the DR available online and in bookstores. For a frame-quality map, the **Instituto Geográfico** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 809-682-2680; El Conde btwn Las Damas & Av del Puerto; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri), sells a great five-panel, 1m-by-1.5m map for US\$35.

MONEY

The Dominican monetary unit is the peso, indicated by the symbol RD\$ (or sometimes just R\$). Though the peso is technically divided into 100 centavos (cents) per peso, prices are usually rounded to the nearest peso. There are one- and five-peso coins, while paper money comes in denominations of 10, 20, 50, 100, 500 and 1000 pesos. Many tourist-related businesses, including most midrange and top-end hotels, list prices in US dollars, but accept pesos at the going exchange rate.

ATMs

ATMs are common in the Dominican Republic and are, without question, the best way to obtain Dominican pesos and manage your money on the road. Banks with reliable ATMs include Banco Popular, Banco Progreso, Banco de Reservas, Banco León and Scotiabank. As in any country, be smart about where and when you withdraw cash – at night on a dark street in a bad part of town is not the ideal spot. Most ATMs are not in the bank itself, but in a small booth accessible from the street (and thus available 24 hours). Unless otherwise indicated all banks listed have ATMs.

Credit Cards

Credit and debit cards are becoming more common among Dominicans (and more widely accepted for use by foreigners). Visa and MasterCard are more common than Amex but most cards are accepted in areas frequented by tourists. Some but not all businesses add a surcharge for credit-card purchases (typically 16%) – the federal policy of withdrawing sales tax directly from credit-card transactions means merchants will simply add the cost directly to the bill.

Moneychangers

Moneychangers will approach you in a number of tourist centers. They are unlikely

to be aggressive. You will get equally favorable rates, however, and a much securer transaction, at an ATM, a bank or an exchange office.

Taxes & Tipping

There are two taxes on food and drink sales: a 16% sales tax (ITBIS) and a 10% service charge. The latter is supposed to be divided among the wait and kitchen staff; some people choose to leave an additional 10% tip for exceptional service. There's a 23% tax on hotel rooms – ask whether the listed rates include taxes. It's customary to tip bellhops for carrying your bags and to leave US\$1 to US\$2 per night for the housecleaner at resorts. You should also tip tour guides, some of whom earn no other salary.

Traveler's Checks

With the advent of reliable ATM networks, traveler's checks have lost much of their usefulness. That said, traveler's checks can be exchanged at most banks and *casas de cambio* (exchange booths) in tourist centers. You may be required to show your passport and, in some cases, the receipt from when you purchased the checks.

POST

There are post offices in every town and hours are typically 8am to noon and 2pm to 5pm Monday to Friday, and 8am to noon only on Saturday. It costs about US\$0.75 to send a postcard to North and Central America, slightly more for Europe. Service is relatively reliable – postcards are more likely to arrive than letters – but by no means foolproof. For important documents and packages, definitely go with an international courier, such as UPS, DHL or Federal Express. They each have stand-alone offices in Santo Domingo; in smaller towns, they are usually affiliated with Metro Pac or another local delivery agency, which will have all the packaging and tracking materials.

SHOPPING

The DR is one of the largest producers of cigars in the world; some of the better-known brands are Macanudo, Davidoff, Fonseca, Montecristo and Preferidos. Santiago is the center of tobacco plantations and a good place to experiment with different brands to find your favorite.

Dominican rum is a popular item, available everywhere, from the most modest *col-*

mado (combination corner store, grocery and bar) to airport duty-free shops. For more on brands and varieties, see p67.

Dominican amber is among the best in the world, both for its variety of color and the high number of 'inclusions' (insects, plant material and other things trapped inside). The quality of the jewelry made from amber varies widely, but if you look around enough, you'll find an excellent piece that's in your price range. For help on choosing a piece, see boxed text, p173. Larimar is another beautiful material – a blue mineral with white streaks – and is found only in the DR. Amber and larimar are typically sold together, so a shop that's good for one is likely to be good for the other. You can also find objects made of horn, wood and leather.

You can't possibly miss the Haitian-style paintings that are for sale in virtually every tourist destination in the country. Most are very generic and formulaic, unsurprising since their production resembles a car-parts factory. More professional pieces can be found in several galleries in Santo Domingo (p99) or the Haitian Caraibes Art Gallery in Las Terrenas (p161).

Many souvenirs sold in the DR are made from endangered plant and animal species, and you should avoid buying them. All species of sea turtles are endangered, so steer clear of any item made of turtle shell – typically combs and bracelets – or food dishes made from *carey* (turtle meat). The same goes for products made from American crocodiles and black or white coral, despite what some store owners say.

TELEPHONE

There has been some flux regarding telecommunications companies and there could be more mergers, acquisitions and divestments in the future. In 2007 Verizon changed the name of its services to Claro (wireless division) and CODETEL (fixed line and broadband market). Orange, Tricom and Centennial are the other companies and competitors.

The easiest way to make a phone call in the DR is to pay per minute (average rates per minute to USA US\$0.20; per minute to Europe US\$0.50; per minute to Haiti US\$0.50) at a Codetel Centro de Comunicaciones call center or an internet café – virtually all operate as dual call centers.

Cell (mobile) phones are very popular and travelers with global-roaming-enabled

phones can often receive and make cell-phone calls. It's worth checking with your cell-phone carrier for details on rates and accessibility – be aware that per-minute fees can be exorbitant. If you have a GSM phone, and you can unlock it, you use a SIM card bought from Orange or Claro (prepaid start-up kit US\$10). If it's CDMA, it will work with Claro, Tricom or Centennial. New cell phones can be bought at Orange with a prepaid SIM card for less than US\$30; used phones at Claro can be bought for US\$10.

Phone cards to be used at public phones are available in denominations of RD\$50, RD\$100, RD\$150, RD\$200 and RD\$250. Remember that you must dial ☎ 1 + 809 for all calls within the DR, even local ones. There are no regional codes. Local calls cost US\$0.14 per minute and national calls are US\$0.21 per minute. Toll-free numbers have ☎ 200 for their prefix (not the area code).

TIME

The DR is four hours behind Greenwich Mean Time. In autumn and winter it is one hour ahead of New York, Miami and Toronto. However, because the country does not adjust for daylight saving time as do the USA and Canada, it's in the same time zone as New York, Miami and Toronto from the first Sunday in April to the last Sunday in October.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Almost every city in the DR that's frequented by tourists has a tourist office, and a number of less-visited towns do as well. Whether they are actually helpful is another question entirely. In general, treat the information you get at tourist offices skeptically and double-check with other sources. Some tourist offices offer maps, bus schedules or a calendar of upcoming events, which can be handy.

A service-oriented tourist office is located in the heart of the Zona Colonial, on Calle Isabel La Católica beside Parque Colón (for more details, see p78). The location and business hours of tourist offices throughout the country, where they exist, are listed in the appropriate Information sections within the destination chapters.

There are also information counters at both Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas and at Aeropuerto Internacional Gregorio Luperón near Puerto Plata.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Few Latin American countries are well suited for travelers with disabilities, and the Dominican Republic is no different. On the other hand, all-inclusive resorts can be ideal for travelers with mobility impairments, as room, meals, and day- and nighttime activities are all within close proximity, and there are plenty of staff members to help you navigate around the property. Some resorts have a few wheelchair-friendly rooms, with larger doors and handles in the bathroom. And, it should be said, Dominicans tend to be extremely helpful and accommodating people. Travelers with disabilities should expect some long and curious stares, but also quick and friendly help from perfect strangers and passersby.

VISAS

The majority of would-be foreign travelers in the Dominican Republic do not need to obtain visas prior to arrival. Tourist cards (you don't need to retain this for your return flight) are issued for US\$10 upon arrival to visitors from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA, among many others. Whatever your country of origin, a valid passport is necessary.

Tourist Card Extensions

A tourist card is good for up to 30 days from the date of issue, though the exact length depends on what the officer writes on the card when you enter. If you need just a little extra time, it's usually unnecessary to formally extend – instead you'll be charged a 'fine' of about US\$5 for every month you overstayed when you depart from the country. Another easy way to extend your time is to leave the DR briefly – most likely to Haiti – and then return, at which point you'll be issued a brand-new tourist card. (You may have to pay entrance and departure fees in both countries, of course.)

To extend your tourist card anywhere from 15 days to three months the official way, you must apply in Santo Domingo at the **Dirección General de Migración** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-508-2555; www.migracion.gov.do; cnr Av 30 de Mayo & Héroes de Luperón; ☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Fri) at least two weeks before your original card expires. You'll be

required to fill out a form – usually available in Spanish only – and to present your passport, a photocopy of your passport's information page(s) and two passport-size photos of yourself. The fee is US\$10; your passport and new tourist card will be ready for pickup at the same office two weeks later. The process is a good way to blow an entire day.

VOLUNTEERING

Many of the NGOs are primarily community networks attempting to develop sustainable ecotourism. There are no formal volunteering programs, but if you speak good Spanish and don't mind some elbow grease (or office work), you may be of some use to them. You should have at least a month to play with. Be sure to contact them well ahead of time. There is occasionally some wildlife volunteering on offer – helping biologists hatch turtle eggs, for instance – and the best months for field work are February, April, May, August and October. Several of the more established organizations that accept volunteers include the following:

CEDAF (Centro para el Desarrollo Agropecuario y Forestal; ☎ 809-894-0005; www.cedaf.org.do; José Amado Soler 50, Ensanche Paraíso, Santo Domingo) This nationwide NGO helps local farmers develop sustainable ways to use the land, including market gardening on mountainside terraces to reduce erosion. Few volunteers make their way here, and capacity is limited. If you're looking for an internship and speak good Spanish, it's worth making contact.

DREAM Project (Dominican Republic Education & Mentoring; ☎ 809-571-0497) Nonconformists will want to avoid this rigidly managed NGO, which otherwise does excellent work in the Cabarete schools.

Grupo Jaragua (www.grupojaragua.org.do) The largest and oldest NGO in the southwest. Based in Santo Domingo, it concentrates on biodiversity and conservation through microfinancing as little as US\$300 to assist locals with bee farming etc.

Punta Cana Ecological Foundation (☎ 809-959-9221; www.puntacana.org) One of the pioneers of sustainable development in the DR; projects targeted at restoring and preserving natural environment in Punta Cana area.

REDEC (Red Enriquillo de Ecoturismo Comunitario; ☎ 809-913-1587; Barahona) Founded in 2006, this is a network of small NGOs.

REDOTOR (Red Dominicana de Turismo Rural; ☎ 809-487-1057; tinglar@yahoo.com) Promotes alternative and sustainable tourism projects.

SOEPA (☎ 809-899-4702) Its biggest project is maintenance and development at Cachóte (see boxed text, p235).

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women traveling without men in the Dominican Republic should expect to receive a fair amount of attention, usually in the form of stares and admiring comments like '*Hola, preciosa*' (Hello, beautiful). Dominican men are also consummate butt-lookers, no matter what the age, size, shape or nationality of the woman passing by. Then again, women's fashion in the DR is all about accentuating what you've got, and having your backside checked out by men is clearly more bothersome to foreign women than it is to many Dominicans. Indeed, much of what women travelers experience as unwanted attention is fairly ordinary male–female interaction among Dominicans. Many Dominicans, male and female, are somewhat baffled by the strong negative reaction some foreign women have to men's 'appreciation.'

But that is not at all to say that women travelers shouldn't take the same precautions they would in other countries, or ignore their instincts about certain men or situations they encounter. Robbery and assaults, though rare against tourists, do occur and women are often seen as easier targets than men. In much the same way, it isn't a good idea to flash money, jewelry or electronics. Foreign women who don't want extra male attention should dress a little conservatively to avoid sending the wrong message.

Beyond that, simply follow basic common-sense precautions when traveling by yourself; avoid isolated streets and places, especially at night, and don't hitchhike or camp alone.

Dominican Republic Transportation

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

Flights and tours can be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

The vast majority of tourists entering the Dominican Republic arrive by air. Independent travelers typically arrive at the main international airport outside of Santo Domingo, Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas. Flights from Boston, Fort Lauderdale, New York, Newark, Miami, Philadelphia, San Juan (Puerto Rico) and various European countries arrive there daily. Passing through immigration is a relatively simple process. Once

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

DEPARTURE TAX

The US\$20 departure tax is usually already included in the cost of your airline ticket, and exceptions are rare. Those leaving by land or sea are routinely charged US\$25. You don't need to retain your tourist card if you are leaving the country by air.

disembarked, you are guided to the immigration area where you must buy a tourist card (US\$10). You're expected to pay in US dollars. Euros and GBP are accepted, but you lose out substantially on the rate; a few people report that DR pesos (RD\$) are accepted, though this is not official policy. Once you've filled in the card, join the queue in front of one of the immigration officers. They will often assume you are visiting for two weeks or less, and give you just 15 days, so if you plan on staying longer, let the officer know this right away – he is allowed to give you up to 30 days on a tourist card. In general, entering is a breeze. The procedure is the same if you arrive at one of the smaller airports like Puerto Plata or Punta Cana, though the latter is easily the busiest airport in the country in terms of tourist arrivals. Officers are even less scrutinizing there, but the queues may become backed up as you are asked to pause for an obligatory photograph with two woman dressed in some kind of garish island costume reminiscent of the Chiquita Banana mascot.

Passport

All foreign visitors must have a valid passport to enter the DR. Be sure you have room for both entry and exit stamps, and that your passport is valid for at least six months beyond your planned travel dates. See p253 for information on visas.

AIR Airports & Airlines

The DR has 10 international airports, though at least three of them are primarily used for

domestic flights (Aeropuerto Internacional Herrera outside of Santo Domingo closed in 2006).

Aeropuerto Internacional Arroyo Barril (ABA; ☎ 809-248-2718) West of Samaná, a small airstrip used mostly during whale-watching season (January to March) that handles only propeller aircraft.

Aeropuerto Internacional Cibao (STI; ☎ 809-581-8072) Serves Santiago and the interior.

Aeropuerto Internacional El Catey (AZS; ☎ 809-338-0094) New airport 40km west of Samaná that handles international flights from various European cities and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Aeropuerto Internacional El Portillo (EPS) Airstrip only a few kilometers from Las Terrenas that gets busiest during whale-watching season. Used mostly for domestic flights.

Aeropuerto Internacional Gregorio Luperón (POP; ☎ 809-586-1992) Serves Playa Dorada and Puerto Plata.

Aeropuerto Internacional La Isabela (JBO; aka DR Joaquin Balaguer, Higuero; ☎ 809-567-3900) Located 16km north of Santo Domingo in Higuero, this airport services domestic airlines.

Aeropuerto Internacional La Romana (LRM; aka Casa de Campo; ☎ 809-689-1548) Modern airport near La Romana and Casa de Campo; handles primarily charter flights from the US, Canada and Europe.

Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas (SDQ; ☎ 809-549-0081) Located 20km east of Santo Domingo. The country's main international airport, with modern facilities, including a strong wi-fi signal once past security.

Aeropuerto Internacional María Montez (BRX; ☎ 809-524-4144) Located 5km from Barahona; does not have a regular commercial passenger service.

Aeropuerto Internacional Punta Cana (PUJ; ☎ 809-959-2473) Serves Bávaro and Punta Cana, and is the busiest airport in the country.

AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

International carriers with services to the DR:

Aerpostal (VH; ☎ 809-549-8067; www.aerpostal.com; hub: Caracas)

Air Canada (AC; ☎ 809-541-2929; www.aircanada.ca; hub: Toronto)

Air Europa (AEA; ☎ 809-683-8020; www.aireuropa.com; hub: Mallorca)

Air France (AF; ☎ 809-686-8432; www.airfrance.com; hub: Paris)

Air Jamaica (JM; ☎ 809-872-0080; www.airjamaica.com; hub: Kingston)

American Airlines (AA; ☎ 809-542-5151; www.aa.com; hub: New York) Flies to Samaná via San Juan (Puerto Rico); also flies to Santo Domingo, Santiago and Puerto Plata.

Condor (DE; ☎ 809-689-9625; www.condor.com; hub: Munich)

Continental Airlines (CO; ☎ 809-262-1060; www.continental.com; hub: Newark)

COPA Airlines (CM; ☎ 809-472-2672; www.copaair.com; hub: Panama City) Several flights a week from Santo Domingo to Havana, Kingston and Port of Spain (Trinidad).

Cubana Air (CU; ☎ 809-227-2040; www.cubana.cu; hub: Havana) Twice-weekly direct flights between Santo Domingo and Havana.

Delta (DL; ☎ 809-200-9191; www.delta.com; hub: Atlanta)

Iberia (IB; ☎ 809-508-7979; www.iberia.com; hub: Madrid)

Jet Blue (B6; ☎ 809-549-1793; www.jetblue.com; hub: New York) Nonstop service between JFK and Puerto Plata, Santiago and Santo Domingo. Also nonstop service from Orlando to Santo Domingo.

Lan Chile (LAN; ☎ 809-689-2116; www.lan.com; hub: Santiago)

LTU (LT; ☎ 809-586-4075; www.ltu.com; hub: Dusseldorf) Flights from Germany and Austria to Samaná.

Lufthansa (LH; ☎ 809-689-9625; www.lufthansa.com; hub: Frankfurt)

Martinair Holland (MP; ☎ 809-621-7777; www.martinair.com; hub: Amsterdam) Flights from Amsterdam and Frankfurt to Puerto Plata and Punta Cana.

Mexicana (MX; ☎ 809-541-1016; www.mexicana.com; hub: Mexico City)

Spirit Airlines (NK; ☎ 809-381-4111; www.spiritair.com; Fort Lauderdale) Nonstop flights from Fort Lauderdale to Santo Domingo and Punta Cana.

Swissport (☎ 809-508-2277; www.swissport.com) Handles ticketing and other ground services of various airlines and charters.

US Airways (US; ☎ 809-540-0505; www.usair.com; hub: Philadelphia)

Varig (RG; ☎ 809-563-3434; www.varig.com; hub: Sao Paulo)

LAND

There are three points where you can cross between Haiti and the DR. The most trafficked is at the Jimaní–Malpasse crossing in the south, on the road that links Santo Domingo and Port-au-Prince. Also busy is the northern crossing at Dajabón–Ouanaminthe, which is on the road between Santiago and Cap-Haïtien (only a six-hour drive with the completion of a new highway on the Haitian side); however, you should try to avoid crossing on market days (Monday and Friday) because of the enormous crush of people and the risk of theft. The third border crossing is at Comendador (aka Elías Piña) and Belladère,

which sees few foreign travelers. It's the least trafficked of the three and certainly the dodgiest; having to wade the river or cross it on a motorcycle is also a nuisance. Only Haitians and Dominicans are permitted to use other border crossings, including the one at Pedernales–Ainse-a-Pietre in the far south, a popular route for smugglers.

Immigration offices on the Dominican side are usually open 8am to 6pm, and 9am to 6pm on the Haitian side. It's always a good idea to arrive as early as possible, so you are sure to get through both countries' border offices and onto a bus well before dark. When deciding between either crossing in the late afternoon or staying an extra night and crossing in the morning, choose the latter. Also, long lines and immigration officials who leave early or take long lunch breaks can cause delays at the border.

Tourists leaving the DR will be asked to produce their passports and their tourist cards and are likely to be asked more questions than if they were leaving via an airport. However, this shouldn't be a concern since it's usually only out of curiosity that a tourist would travel this way. Officially, you are supposed to pay US\$25 to leave the DR, which gives you the right to reenter at the same point for no extra charge. However, border officials have been known to ask for an extra US\$5 to US\$10 to leave, and the full US\$10 to reenter for no other reason than they can. It's worth politely pointing out that you have already paid the full fee. In the end, however, you may have to cough up the extra cash.

When you enter Haiti, you pay a US\$10 fee. Leaving Haiti, you must present your passport and yellow entry card, but are not supposed to have to pay anything. That said, it's wise to have small bills on hand (US cash is always best) to smooth your passage if need be. As with Dominican officials, you don't have much recourse if they decide to charge you extra 'fees.' Unless the fees are exorbitant, the best thing to do is simply pay up and move on.

Caribe Tours, Capital Coach Lines and Terra Bus service the Santo Domingo–Port-au-Prince (see p102) route daily; it's the most convenient way to reach Haiti via public transportation. From the north coast it's easy enough to reach Dajabón, but then you have to transfer to a Haitian vehicle on the other side.

Ayido Tours runs a bus service from Cap-Haïtien to Santiago; see p336 for details.

Rental vehicles are not allowed to cross from one country into the other, and you need special authorization to cross the border with a private vehicle. For specific information about the border facilities and services in individual towns, check the relevant destination chapters in this book.

SEA

The only regularly scheduled international ferry service is between the DR and Puerto Rico. However, international cruise ships on Caribbean tours commonly stop in Santo Domingo, Cayo Levantado in the Península de Samaná and elsewhere. Sans Souci, the Santo Domingo port, is undergoing a massive renovation, including new docking areas, terminals, hotels and a convention center.

Ferries del Caribe (www.ferriesdelcaribe.com); Santo Domingo (☎ 809-688-4400); Santiago (☎ 809-724-8771); Mayagüez, Puerto Rico (☎ 787-832-4400); San Juan, Puerto Rico (☎ 787-725-2643) offers a passenger and car ferry service between Santo Domingo and Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. The trip takes about 12 hours and departs three times weekly. See Santo Domingo (p101) for details.

GETTING AROUND

AIR

The DR is a fairly small country, so in theory at least it's easy to drive or take public transportation from one side of the country to the other. In practice, however, the inadequate road network will behoove some with limited time to consider flying. It's a more expensive option, but often a convenient and logical one that can save you an entire day of road rage. Most one-way flights cost US\$35 to US\$170. The main domestic carriers and air taxi companies include the following:

AeroDomca (☎ 809-567-1195; www.aerodomca.com) Scheduled flights between La Isabela outside Santo Domingo to El Portillo near Las Terrenas (US\$75). Charter flights can be booked to almost any airport.

Air Century (☎ 809-826-4222; www.aircentury.com) Charter flights from La Isabela outside Santo Domingo.

Take Off (☎ 809-552-1333; www.takeoffweb.com) Offers the widest selection of scheduled flights, including Las Americas in Santo Domingo to El Portillo near Las Terrenas (\$80), Punta Cana to El Portillo (US\$116) and Puerto Plata to La Romana (US\$170). There's a small, efficient office with English speakers in the Plaza Brisas in Bávaro. As of yet there is no office at the Aeropuerto Internacional Las

Américas; ask at the 2nd-floor information booth to be directed to personnel.

BICYCLE

The DR's undermaintained highways are not well suited for cycling, and Dominican drivers are not exactly accommodating to people on bikes. Add to that the high number of motorcycles (which move faster than bikes but slower than cars), and *gua-guas* (local buses) and *públicos* (private cars operating as taxis) making frequent unannounced stops, and the situation on the side of the road is hectic to say the least. However, mountain biking on the DR's back roads and lesser-used highways can be very rewarding, and a number of recommended tours are available from Jarabacoa and Cabarete for just that (p64).

There are very few places where you can rent a bike, and none are for long-distance travel. If you're planning a multiday ride, definitely consider bringing your own bike. If you're joining a bike tour, most tour operators will provide you with a bike as part of the price. You'll find bike-rental outfits in Las Terrenas, Las Galleras and at some of the resort areas. (A number of resorts and a few independent hotels offer bicycles for guests' use.) Expect to pay around US\$5 to US\$15 per day. There are a few agencies that offer multiday mountain bike tours; see p189 and p215.

BOAT

The only regularly scheduled domestic passenger boat route in the DR is the ferry service between Samaná and Sabana de la Mar, on opposite sides of the Bahía de Samaná in the northeastern part of the country. The journey is subject to weather and departures are frequently cancelled. There is no car ferry service here, so unfortunately, if you arrive in Sabana de la Mar with a rental vehicle, you'll have to leave it behind and return by the same route you arrived.

BUS

The DR has a great bus system, with frequent service throughout the country. And since it's relatively small in size, there are none of the epic overnight journeys travelers often encounter in places like Mexico or Brazil. There are two classes of bus service in the DR: *primera* (1st class) utilizes large air-conditioned buses similar to Greyhound buses in the US. Virtually all 1st-class buses have toilets in the back and TV's

in the aisles showing movies en route. Fares are low – the most expensive 1st-class ticket is less than US\$10. Unfortunately, there are no central bus terminals in the majority of cities and each company has its own station location.

Second-class service is on minibuses known as *gua-guas*, which are more frequent than 1st-class buses but go much more slowly as they stop to pick up and drop off passengers along the way. *Gua-guas* are divided into two types – the majority are *caliente* (literally 'hot'), which don't have air-conditioning, naturally. For every four or five *caliente* buses there is usually an *expreso*, which typically has air-conditioning, makes fewer stops and costs slightly more. Within these two categories there's a virtual rainbow of diversity in terms of vehicle quality and reliability.

Classes

FIRST CLASS

First-class buses leave from designated terminals and you must buy your ticket before boarding. They almost never stop along the road to pick up passengers but drivers are often willing to drop passengers off at various points along the way; they will not, however, open the luggage compartment at any point other than the actual terminal. If you plan on getting off early, bring your bags onboard with you. This is actually a very good idea, as you generally won't have to worry about your bag being stolen or accidentally unloaded along the way. That said, there are usually intermediate bathroom and snack stops, and it's a good idea at those times to check that your bag did not get removed.

First-class carriers include the following:
Caribe Tours (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-221-4422; cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Leopoldo Navarro, Santo Domingo) The most extensive bus line, with service everywhere but the south east.

El Canario (☎ 809-291-5594) Not exactly 1st-class vehicles, but the only daily direct service between Puerto Plata and Samaná (US\$7, 3½ to four hours), with stops in Nagua and Sánchez.

Expreso Santo Domingo Bávaro (Map p77; ☎ 809-682-9670; cnr Juan Sánchez Ruiz & Máximo Gómez, Santo Domingo) Connects Santo Domingo and Bávaro with a stop in La Romana.

Metro (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-566-7126; Calle Francisco Prats Ramírez, Santo Domingo) Located behind Plaza Central Shopping Mall in Santo Domingo, Metro serves nine cities, mostly along the Santo Domingo–Puerto Plata corridor.

Terra Bus (Map pp74-5; ☎ 809-531-0383; Plaza Lama, cnr Avs 27 de Febrero & Winston Churchill, Santo Domingo) Air-con service from Santo Domingo to Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

GUA-GUAS

Wherever long-distance buses don't go, you can be sure a *gua-gua* does. *Gua-guas* are typically midsize buses holding around 25 to 30 passengers. They rarely have signs, but the driver's assistant (known as the *cobrador*, or 'charger' since one of his jobs is to collect fares from passengers) will yell out the destination of the bus to potential fares on the side of the road. Don't hesitate to ask a local if you're unsure which one to take. *Gua-guas* pick up and drop off passengers anywhere along the route – to flag one down simply hold out your hand – the common gesture is to point at the curb in front of you (as if to say 'stop right here') but just about any gesture will do. Most *gua-guas* pass every 15 to 30 minutes and cost US\$1 to US\$2, but unless you have the exact amount some *cobradors* may pocket the change of unwary foreigners. It's a good idea to carry change or small bills and to find out the exact cost in advance by asking a local waiting with you at the stop.

Reservations

Reservations aren't usually necessary and rarely even taken, even on 1st-class buses. The exceptions are the international buses to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, operated by Caribe Tours and Terra Bus. During Dominican holidays you can sometimes buy your ticket a day or two in advance, which assures you a spot and saves you the time and hassle of waiting in line at a busy terminal with all your bags. Finally, there are a few routes where you should arrive early to secure a spot, either because the bus fills up or because it may leave early. Those cases are noted in the appropriate chapters.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Though the DR's bus and *gua-gua* system is excellent, having your own car is invariably faster and more convenient. Even if renting a car isn't in your budget for the entire trip, consider renting one for a select couple of days, to reach sights that are isolated or not well served by public transportation.

Driver's License

For travelers from most countries, your home country driver's license allows you to drive in the DR. Be sure it's valid.

Fuel & Spare Parts

Most towns have at least one gas station, typically right along the highway on the outskirts

of town. There are a couple of different companies, but prices are essentially the same for all. The base price of gasoline is regulated by the federal government, but has fluctuated wildly in recent years. At the time of research, gas prices had just been hiked to US\$4.50 to US\$5 and were still on the rise.

Play it safe and always keep your gas tank at least half full. Many *bombas* (gas stations) in the DR close by 7pm, and even when they are open they don't always have gas. If you're traveling on back roads or in a remote part of the country, your best bet is to buy gas from people selling it from their front porch. Look for the large pink jugs sitting on tables on the side of the road.

The most common car trouble is to end up with a punctured or damaged tire caused by pot holes, speed bumps and rocks or other debris in the road. The word for tire is *goma* (literally 'rubber') and a tire shop is called a *gomero*, which are even more common than gas stations. If you can make it to one on your busted tire, the guys there can patch a flat (US\$5 to US\$8), replace a damaged tire (US\$10 to US\$50 depending on type of tire and whether you want a new or used replacement), or just put the spare on for you (US\$1 to US\$2).

Insurance

The multinational car-rental agencies typically offer comprehensive, nondeductible collision and liability insurance for fairly small daily fees. Smaller agencies usually offer partial coverage, with a deductible ranging from US\$100 to US\$2000. Several credit-card companies, including Amex, offer comprehensive coverage for rentals, but you should check your own insurance policy before declining the rental company's.

Rental

Familiar multinational agencies like Hertz, Avis, Europcar, Alamo and Dollar all have offices at Aeropuerto Internacional Las Américas (and pickup service at airports like Punta Cana), as well as in Santo Domingo and other cities. Not only are their rates usually much less than those of local or national agencies, but their vehicles are of much better quality and they provide reliable and comprehensive service and insurance. If you plan to do any driving outside major cities, it's highly recommended, if not necessary,

to rent a 4WD. Rates typically cost US\$40 to US\$100 per day, but if you make a reservation in advance via the internet discounts are substantial. Motorcycles can also be rented, but only experienced riders should do so because of poor road conditions. It's usually possible to pick up and drop off the car at different locations for an additional fee.

Road Conditions

Roads in the DR range from excellent to awful, sometimes along the same highway over a very short distance. The *autopista* (freeway) between Santo Domingo and Santiago has as many as eight lanes and is fast moving and in excellent condition. However, on the rest of the highways, be alert for potholes, speed bumps and people walking along the roadside, especially near populated areas. On all roads, large or small, watch for slow-moving cars and especially motorcycles. Be particularly careful when driving at night, as potholes and speed bumps are harder to spot and many motorcycles and pedestrians don't have lights or reflectors. Better yet, *never drive at night*. Even the most skilled person with the reflexes of a superhero will probably end up in a ditch by the side of the road.

Several new highways were under construction at the time of research and scheduled to be completed in the near future. Most important of these is the one that will cut the driving time between Santo Domingo and Samaná nearly in half. There's a major new road being built in the Punta Cana area to alleviate the heavy traffic and the long commute between the airport and resort areas.

Some of the highways, including Hwy 3 heading out of Santo Domingo to the east and Hwy 2 leaving the city to the west, have toll fees of fairly nominal amounts (around US\$1). It's best to have exact change that you can simply toss into the basket and quickly move on. If not, there are booths and collectors who can give change.

Road Rules

First rule is there are none. In theory, road rules in the DR are the same for most countries in the Americas, and the lights and signs are the same shape and color you find in the US or Canada. Seatbelts are required at all times. That said, driving in the DR is pretty much a free-for-all, a test of ones' nerves and will, a continuous series of games of chicken

where the loser is the one who decides to give way just before the moment of impact.

In small towns, nay in all towns, traffic lights are frequently ignored, though you should always plan to stop at them. Watch what other drivers are doing – if everyone is going through, you probably should, too, as it can be even more dangerous to stop if the cars behind you aren't expecting it.

HITCHHIKING

Though hitchhiking is never entirely safe anywhere in the world, Dominicans hitch all the time, both men and women, especially in rural areas where fewer people have cars and *gua-gua* service is sparse. It's also very common in resort areas like Bávaro, where a large number of workers commute to Higüey or other towns nearby every morning and evening. And the *motoconcho* (motorcycle taxi) and *público* systems in cities of all sizes are themselves essentially hitchhiking, since there is little formal regulation. That said, it is rare to see foreigners hitchhiking, and doing so (especially if you have bags) carries a greater risk than for locals.

LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

Bus

Large cities like Santo Domingo and Santiago have public bus systems that operate as they do in most places around the world. Many of the larger city buses are imported from Brazil, and are the kind in which you board in the back and pay the person sitting beside the turnstile. Other city buses are more or less like *gua-guas*, where you board quickly and pay the *cobrador* when he comes around. In general, you will probably take relatively few city buses, simply because *públicos* follow pretty much the same routes and pass more frequently.

Motoconcho

Cheaper and easier to find than taxis, *motoconchos* (motorcycle taxis) are the best and sometimes only way, to get around in many towns. An average ride should set you back no more than US\$1.50. However, a high number of riders have been injured or killed in *motoconcho* accidents; ask the driver to slow down (*¡Más espacio por favor!*) if you think he's driving dangerously. Avoid two passengers on a bike since not only is the price the same as taking separate bikes but the extra weight makes most scooters harder

to control. For longer trips, or if you have any sort of bag or luggage, *motoconchos* are usually impractical and certainly less comfortable than the alternatives.

Públicos

These are banged-up cars, minivans or small pickup trucks that pick up passengers along set routes, usually main boulevards. *Públicos* (also called *conchos* or *carros*) don't have signs but the drivers hold their hands out the window to solicit potential fares. They are also identifiable by the crush of people inside them – up to seven in a midsize car! To flag

one down simply hold out your hand – the fare is around US\$0.30. If there is no one else in the car, be sure to tell the driver you want *servicio público* (public service) to avoid paying private taxi rates.

Taxi

Dominican taxis rarely cruise for passengers – instead they wait at designated *sitios* (stops), which are located at hotels, bus terminals, tourist areas and main public parks. You also can phone a taxi service (or ask your hotel receptionist to call for you). Taxis do not have meters – agree on a price beforehand.

THE 2010 EARTHQUAKE

On 12 January, 2010, an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale hit Haiti, with its epicenter near the town of Leògâne, 25km west of Port-au-Prince. The earthquake devastated swathes of the capital, Leògâne and Petit-Goève, and badly damaged Jacmel. The final death toll may never be exactly known, but it's estimated that around 200,000 people lost their lives. The earthquake caused over US\$7 billion damage to Haiti's infrastructure. The Inter-American Development Bank reported the earthquake to be the most devastating natural disaster of modern times.

The international community responded with a massive relief effort, but the speed of the response was initially hampered by the fact that the earthquake had not only put Port-au-Prince's airport and port out of action, but also leveled the centers of government, from the Palais National and Parliament down. Similarly, the UN headquarters was destroyed and its chief of mission killed. The transport hubs were soon reopened by the US military, who sent thousands of personnel, but a lack of agency coordination (later criticized by senior UN staff) further contributed to delays, and even a month after the earthquake there were areas that had yet to receive any relief or assistance

The immediate needs were immense. A million people were rendered homeless and up to 250,000 buildings in the capital alone were estimated to be damaged or destroyed. Those who had swelled Port-au-Prince's shanties in recent decades were particularly affected, with whole neighborhoods of cheaply built shacks flattened in an instant. In the aftermath, tented camps sprang up across the city wherever there was space. Shelter was a huge priority, with the need for adequate tents essential in the face of the rains and hurricane season. At the same time, the destruction saw a large-scale exodus from Port-au-Prince, with people leaving to stay with relatives in the provinces. One of the lasting legacies of the earthquake is the high number of amputees among survivors.

Rebuilding will take a matter of years, not months. With the emergency medical emergency phase of the relief operation over, the new priorities are longer-term primary care and public health, particularly for those living in crowded temporary shelters. Rubble clearance for rebuilding is also a high priority.

Travel to Haiti?

While as of March 2010 non-essential travel to the affected areas was not advised, tourism income can undoubtedly play a part in Haiti's economic recovery. Volunteer tourism, of the sort that was seen after the 2004 Asian Tsunami and in post-Katrina New Orleans, will also have its part to play, although at time of publication organized volunteer programs were yet to fully take shape. It should be noted that away from the center, places like Cap-Haïtien, the northern coast and the southwest were largely untouched by the earthquake, although most towns have received influxes of those displaced by the quake.

The following sights in Port-au-Prince are known to have been destroyed: Palais National, Marché de Fer, Centre d'Art, Sainte Trinité Episcopalian Cathedral and Notre Dame Catholic Cathedral. Grand Rue was leveled, although the artists' community survives, as do the majority of the historic gingerbread houses. In Ferme, Fort Jacques was damaged. Jacmel's historic core was also badly damaged.

In Port-au-Prince, St Joseph's Home for Boys Guest House and the Hotel Montana were flattened, while the El Rancho and Villa Creole hotels were damaged and closed after the quake. In Jacmel, the Hôtel Florita was severely damaged. In Petit-Goève, Le Relais de l'Empereur was completely destroyed. In the short term, hotel space is likely to remain at a premium, and advance booking essential.

For updated information on the earthquake, a good place to start is ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int/haiti). Many major international relief and development NGOs such as Oxfam (www.oxfam.org) and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders; www.msf.org) have had a long-term presence in Haiti, but there are also plenty of local NGOs doing valuable work within their own communities, such as Partners in Health (www.pih.org), Lambi Fund (www.lambifund.org), Konbit Pou Ayiti/KONPAY (www.konpay.org) and Fonkoze (www.fonkoze.org).

Further updates are available from www.lonelyplanet.com/haiti.

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