

Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic (DR) is a land of contrasts – the physical kind, like the highest peak and the lowest point in the Caribbean, and the more metaphorical kind, like that between the urban street life of Santo Domingo and the rural villages only a short drive away.

Santo Domingo, or ‘La Capital’ as it’s typically called, is to Dominicans what New York is to Americans, a collage of cultures; or what Havana is to Cubans, a vibrant beating heart that fuels the entire country. It’s also a living museum, offering the sight of New World firsts scattered around the charming cobblestone streets of the Zona Colonial.

The DR is also famous for the large all-inclusive resorts that dominate much of the country’s prime beachfront real estate. However, the result is less like the high-rise congestion of Cancun or Miami and more like low-slung retirement communities, albeit ones populated by families, couples and singles of all ages looking for a hassle-free holiday. Beyond the gated luxury enclaves, the roads lead inland past vast sugar plantations and through small villages.

To get away from the get-away, travelers head to the Peninsula de Samaná, where the European vibe is as strong as an espresso, and where escape is the operative word. Cabarete on the North Coast has winds which draw adrenaline junkies from around the world. And for the anti-Caribbean experience head to the popular mountain retreats of Jarabacoa and Constanza – places where bathing suits are out and sweaters are in.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 48,717 sq km
- **Capital** Santo Domingo de Guzmán
- **Country code** ☎ 809
- **Departure tax** Air: up to US\$20 depending on length of stay; land: US\$20
- **Famous for** Baseball, cockfighting, merengue, cigars, Columbus landing here first
- **Language** Spanish
- **Money** Dominican Republic peso (RD\$); RD\$100 = US\$2.96 = €1.90 = UK£1.50
- **Official name** República Dominicana
- **People** Dominicans
- **Phrase** *Siempre a su orden* (you’re welcome); *gua-gua* (bus)
- **Population** 9 million
- **Visa** Issued on arrival; see p320



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Zona Colonial** (p285) Wander the 500-year-old cobblestone backstreets of the Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo – not much different from the 16th-century version of the city
- **Bávaro & Punta Cana** (p296) Enjoy the miles and miles of beautiful beach and organized beachfront fun
- **Whale-watching** (p301) Feel small – very small – after witnessing the majesty of 30-ton humpbacks breaching and diving on a whale-watching trip from Samaná
- **Kitesurfing** (p311) Strap yourself to the board and pray – for good winds and your safety – and get swept up in the thrill of skimming full speed across the waves
- **Playa Frontón** (p304) Snorkel undisturbed around some of the best reefs the country has to offer

ITINERARIES

- **Five Days** Spend a day in Santo Domingo before zipping up to Samaná for whale-watching, and spend some beach time at Las Galeras.
- **Ten Days** First follow the five-day itinerary, spending a couple of days in Santo Domingo. Then head to Jarabacoa and Cabarete for some adventure tours and Los Haitises National Park for a tour of ancient cave paintings.
- **Two Weeks** Do the 10-day tour, then end your stay with three or four days at an all-inclusive in Bávaro or Punta Cana.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Except in the central mountains, temperatures don't vary much in the Dominican Republic, averaging a summery 81°F (28°C) to 87°F (31°C) in most places for much of the year. Tropical humidity can make the temperatures feel higher, though sea breezes help mitigate the effect. The rainy season is May to October, though in Samaná and on the north coast it can last until December. August and September constitute hurricane season.

The main foreign tourist seasons are December to February and July to August and *Semana Santa* (the week before Easter). Expect higher prices and more crowded beaches at these times – *Semana Santa* is especially busy. February has great weather and you can enjoy Carnaval and the whales in

Samaná. November is good, too – you'll miss the whales but catch baseball season.

HISTORY

First Arrivals

Before Christopher Columbus arrived, the indigenous Taínos (meaning 'Friendly People') lived on the island now known as Hispaniola. Taínos gave the world sweet potatoes, peanuts, guava, pineapple and tobacco – even the word 'tobacco' is Taíno in origin. Yet the Taínos themselves were wiped out by Spanish diseases and slavery. Of the 400,000 Taínos that lived on Hispaniola at the time of European arrival, fewer than 1000 were still alive 30 years later. None exist today.

Independence & Occupation

Two colonies grew on Hispaniola, one Spanish and the other French. Both brought thousands of African slaves to work the land. In 1804, after a 70-year struggle, the French colony gained independence. Haiti, the Taíno name for the island, was the first majority-black republic in the New World.

In 1821 colonists in Santo Domingo declared their independence from Spain. Haiti, which had long aspired to unify the island, promptly invaded its neighbor and occupied it for more than two decades. But Dominicans never accepted Haitian rule and on February 27, 1844, Juan Pablo Duarte – considered the father of the country – led a bloodless coup and reclaimed Dominican autonomy. The country resubmitted to Spanish rule shortly thereafter, but became independent for good in 1864.

The young country endured one disreputable *caudillo* (military leader) after the other. In 1916 US President Woodrow Wilson sent the marines to the Dominican Republic, ostensibly to quell a coup attempt, but they ended up occupying the country for eight years. Though imperialistic, this occupation succeeded in stabilizing the DR.

The Rise of the Caudillo

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, a former security guard and the eventual chief of the Dominican national police, muscled his way into the presidency in February 1930 and dominated the country until his assassination in 1961. He implemented a brutal system of repression, killing and imprisoning political opponents. Though he was himself partly black, Trujillo