

Haiti

On 12 January, 2010, an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale hit Haiti, with its epicenter near the town of Leógâne, 25km west of Port-au-Prince. The earthquake devastated swathes of the capital, Leógâne and Petit-Goâve, and badly damaged Jacmel. The final death toll may never be known, but it's estimated that around 200,000 people lost their lives. The earthquake caused over US\$7 billion of damage; the Inter-American Development Bank called it the most devastating natural disaster of modern times. Rebuilding will take a matter of years, not months.

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. It should be noted that away from the center, places like Cap-Haïtien, the northern coast, and the southwest were largely untouched, although most towns have received influxes of those displaced by the earthquake.

For updated information, a good place to start is ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int/haiti). Many 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 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).

Note that the information in this chapter is from before the earthquake. Further updates are available from www.lonelyplanet.com/haiti.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 27,750 sq km
- **Capital** Port-au-Prince
- **Country code** ☎ 509
- **Departure tax** None (paid for in air ticket)
- **Famous for** Vodou
- **Language** Creole, French
- **Money** Haitian gourde (HTG); HTG100 = US\$2.62 = €1.69 = UK£1.33
- **Official name** Republic of Haiti
- **People** Haitians
- **Phrase** *bonjou/bonswa* (good morning/good afternoon); *mèsi anpil* (thank you); *orevwa/babay* (goodbye); *se konbyen kob li koute?* (how much is it?)
- **Population** 8.7 million
- **Visa** None needed; see p276



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Port-au-Prince** (p266) Explore the unparalleled arts and music scene of Haiti's vibrant and sometimes chaotic capital city
- **Jacmel** (p270) Chill out in this laid-back southern port, the country's handicrafts and Carnival center
- **Citadelle** (p273) Want a tropical mountaintop fortress? We challenge you to find a better one in the Caribbean
- **Vodou** (p264) Dispel your fear of zombies by lifting the lid on this misunderstood but deeply spiritual religion
- **Cornier Plage and Plage Labadie** (p273) Catch some waves on the golden sands of Haiti's dramatic north coast

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Stay a couple of days in Port-au-Prince, then spend two more in Jacmel before taking a flight north to visit the Citadelle.
- **Two Weeks** Follow the itinerary above at a more relaxed pace, and add on Parc National La Visite and some beaches near Cap-Haïtien, Côte des Arcadins or Île-à-Vache.
- **One Month** You can see the whole of Haiti in a month, with time for scuba diving, and more out-of-the-way destinations like Jérémie or Parc National Macaya.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

There's no season for visiting Haiti. April to November are generally the wetter months, and hurricane season (August/September) can cause transport problems due to mudslides. If you plan to visit during Carnival (usually celebrated in February), book well in advance as a good hotel may be hard to find. Otherwise, hotel prices generally don't fluctuate through the year.

HISTORY

Hispaniola's earliest inhabitants arrived around 2600 BC in huge dugout canoes, coming from what is now eastern Venezuela. They were called the Taínos, and by the time Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1492, they numbered some 400,000. However, within 30 years of Columbus' landing, the Taínos were gone, wiped out by disease and abuse.

The Spanish neglected their colony of Santo Domingo, and through the 17th century it

became a haven for pirates and, later, ambitious French colonists. In 1697 the island was formally divided, and the French colony of St-Domingue followed soon after. The French turned St-Domingue over to sugar production on a huge scale. By the end of the 18th century it was the richest colony in the world, with 40,000 colonists lording it over half a million black slaves.

Following the French Revolution in 1789, free mulattos (offspring of colonists and female slaves) demanded equal rights, while the slaves themselves launched a huge rebellion. Led by the inspiring slave leader Toussaint Louverture, the slaves freed themselves by arms and forced France to abolish slavery.

World's First Black Republic

French treachery dispatched Toussaint to a prison death, but in May 1803 his general, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, took the French tricolor flag and, ripping the white out of it, declared he was ripping the white man out of the country. The red and blue were stitched together with the motto *Liberté ou la Mort* (Liberty or Death), creating Haiti's flag.

Dessalines won a decisive victory against the French at the Battle Vertières, near Cap-Haïtien, and on January 1, 1804, at Gonaïves, Dessalines proclaimed independence for St-Domingue and restored its Taíno name, Haiti, meaning 'Mountainous Land.'

Dessalines crowned himself Emperor of Haiti and ratified a new constitution that granted him absolute power. However, his tyrannical approach to the throne inflamed large sections of society to revolt – his death in an ambush at Pont Rouge in 1806 marked the first of many violent overthrows that would plague Haiti for the next 200 years.

Dessalines' death sparked a civil war between the black north, led by Henri Christophe, and the mulatto south, led by Alexandre Pétion. Christophe crowned himself king, while Pétion became president of the southern republic. It took both their deaths (Christophe by suicide) to reunite the country, which happened in 1820 under new southern leader Jean-Pierre Boyer, who established a tenuous peace.

During his reign Boyer paid a crippling indemnity to France in return for diplomatic recognition. The debt took the rest of the century to pay off and turned Haiti into the first Third World debtor nation. Boyer also