

Destination Dominican Republic & Haiti

FAST FACTS: DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Country area: 48,734
sq km

Population: 9.7 million

Population under 14
years old: 32%

Life expectancy at birth:
71.5 years

Adult HIV infection rate:
1.1%

Gross National Income
per capita: US\$2850

Percentage of population
living on less than US\$1
per day: 2.8%

FAST FACTS: HAITI

Country area: 27,560
sq km

Population: 9.5 million

Population under 14
years old: 42%

Life expectancy at birth:
52 years

Adult HIV infection rate:
5.6%

Gross National Income
per capita: US\$490

Percentage of population
living on less than US\$1
per day: 53.9%

Sharing the island of Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic (DR) and Haiti could be said to be two sides of the same coin. At first glance, culture seems to divide the two countries: while the DR is Spanish-speaking and obsessed with baseball, Haitians would rather watch the soccer World Cup and comment on the game in French, or the Creole that's derived from their slave ancestry. But shared history and a common border mean that the DR and Haiti are both dependent on and obsessed with each other.

As Dominicans prepared to head for the polls in presidential elections in mid-2008, the main issue debated up and down the country was, as always, the economy. Recent economic strictures have seen the peso further decline in value and, under guidance from the International Monetary Fund, governmental belt-tightening has been the order of the day. Manufacturing has been squeezed, and although there has been a growth in service industries (notably tourism), the economy as a whole is expected to be under even more pressure in the immediate future.

When the DR catches a cold, Haitians often get the sniffles. Haitians make up a significant (and unloved) proportion of the Dominican workforce, usually doing the lowest-paid jobs that others turn their faces from. The position of temporary Haitian workers, who are perennially discriminated against, is again an election issue. But poor relations can play out in other arenas too. When Haiti temporarily banned imports of Dominican chicken at the start of 2008 amid fears of bird flu, it saw reprisals from Dominican businesses and threats to close the border markets, where many Haitians shop for essentials unavailable at home. Such popular actions threaten the long-mooted free-trade agreement between the two countries.

Haiti's economy remains heavily dependent on foreign aid and remittances from the Haitian diaspora. On the political front, slow but steady progress has been made. The arrival of the heavily armed UN stabilization mission MINUSTAH in 2004 prompted dark jokes that Haiti was the only country in the world not at war that needed a peacekeeping mission, but the UN has overseen successful presidential elections and has largely tackled the problem of endemic gang violence. By all current indicators, Haiti now sees less violent crime than tourist-rich Caribbean destinations like Jamaica. In 2008 the Haitian government put tourism firmly back on its agenda, with plans to improve access to sites and even to launch a 'tourism awareness' program for a Haitian public who have largely forgotten what foreign visitors looked like.

Haiti's newfound sense of cautious optimism gives hope that this corner of the Caribbean could still turn out to be a success story. Travelers heading there now will have the country virtually to themselves and, although the road ahead is bumpy, could possibly discover one of the great secrets of Caribbean tourism. If your holidays are less about adventuring and more about, well, holidaying, the DR continues to play to its strengths, with an established infrastructure and a host of activities. When Columbus made landfall on Hispaniola, the island transfixed him, and whatever you're after, it continues to weave a spell on anyone who washes up on its shores.

Getting Started

Approaching a trip to Hispaniola, your planning is going to be very different depending on whether you're heading to the DR or Haiti. On the surface the two countries have many similarities. At any time of the year you can find great weather, beautiful beaches and a host of interesting sporting and cultural activities in either. Some events that are big draws – spotting humpback whales in the DR, Vodou festivals in Haiti and Carnival in both countries – take place at certain times; you may need to tailor your trip around these if they capture your particular interest. In the DR, there are also peak tourist seasons, which can mean higher prices and larger crowds, and some months across the whole island are rainier than others. These shouldn't be deal-breakers – the prices and weather don't vary *that* much – but are worth considering.

Neither country could truly be called a budget destination in backpacker terms, but Haiti is definitely more expensive to visit. The DR is not only cheaper to visit but often easier to travel in too, having a more stable economy and developed infrastructure ready to receive tourists by the planeload (with plenty of affordable all-inclusive resorts if all you're after is a beach). By contrast, Haiti offers a more unpolished experience, and visitors will do well to prepare themselves for the sometimes harsh realities of travel to a desperately poor country.

Both countries are small enough to cover in a single trip – or possibly even hop between the two to get a full view of the diversity of this stunning island.

WHEN TO GO

Except in the central mountains, temperatures don't vary much in either the DR or Haiti, averaging a summery 28°C to 31°C (81°F to 87°F) in most places for most of the year. In the mountains, sunny days climb to 24°C (75°F) but can just as easily fall to single digits at night or on cloudy days. Tropical humidity can make the temperatures feel higher, though sea breezes help mitigate the effect. The rainy season is from May to October, though in

See Climate Charts for the DR (p247) and Haiti (p343) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- passport and US cash – you'll need both
- valid travel insurance
- the latest news and government travel advice for Haiti
- a flashlight – blackouts are common in the DR and endemic in Haiti
- mosquito repellent – biting bugs are common, and malaria is present in some parts of Haiti (consult a doctor for current malaria travel advice)
- a universal washbasin plug
- biodegradable detergent and travel clothesline
- sunscreen, which can be expensive to buy locally
- an emergency stash of toilet paper and antibacterial hand-cleaning gel
- patience – things do get done, but the pace of life can be several steps slower than at home
- a taste for rum – essential for both countries!

Samaná and the North Coast in the DR it can last until December. Northern Haiti tends to be wetter from November to March. The hurricane season is during August to October.

With fewer visitors, Haiti doesn't have tourist seasons. In the DR, the peak times are from December to February, July to August, and Semana Santa (the week before Easter). Expect higher prices and more-crowded beaches during these times – Semana Santa is especially busy. Note that most water sports and activities, including scuba diving, jet-skiing and even kayaking are prohibited throughout the DR during Semana Santa – well worth noting if these are a key component of your trip.

Several popular events and attractions can only be enjoyed at certain times of the year. In both countries, Carnival is celebrated just before Lent (usually in February). The DR stretches events over several weekends, while the biggest Haitian Carnivals in Port-au-Prince and Jacmel run a week apart – the closest thing Haiti gets to a busy tourist season. February is also one of the best times for whale-watching in Samaná in the DR, although the season officially stretches from mid-January to mid-March. If you're interested in baseball, the Dominican professional season runs from October to late January. Those with a taste for Vodou may want to time their Haitian trips for festivals like Fet Gédé (November), Souvenance (Easter) or the Saut d'Eau pilgrimage (July).

HOW MUCH (DR)?

Internet access (per hour)
US\$0.80

100km bus ride US\$3

Quality cigar US\$4

Box of 25 premium cigars
US\$400

Bleacher seats at Quisqueya Stadium US\$8

COSTS & MONEY Dominican Republic

The DR isn't an especially great destination for shoestring travelers, but most people will be able to get by on even a modest budget. As always, accommodation prices eat the largest portion of your money. A budget hotel will set you back about US\$20 per night, but there's a marked improvement in quality when you move into the midrange bracket – say around US\$40 per night. Only the most expensive hotels will top US\$100. A reasonable daily budget for accommodation, food and transport would be around US\$75, but if you plan on lots of activities like sailing or diving it's a good idea to budget these in separately. If you're heading to the DR with resorts in mind, a decent all-inclusive resort will cost around US\$70 to US\$100, but remember that many places run special offers, and rack rates for walk-in guests are always higher.

Eating in cheaper restaurants, you'll be able to fill up for about US\$7 with a bottle of Presidente beer. For somewhere a little nicer you should double that, then add a further US\$10 to US\$20 for a high-class restaurant.

Transport won't be a major expense. First-class bus tickets shouldn't go beyond about US\$15, while local transport such as *gua-guas* (small buses) and *motoconchos* (motorcycle taxis) are even cheaper. Hiring a car will cost between US\$50 and \$100 per day excluding fuel.

HOW MUCH (HAITI)?

Internet access (per hour)
US\$0.80

100km bus ride US\$3

Moto-taxi ride US\$0.40

Papite (fried banana chips) US\$0.12

Bottle of five-star Barbancourt rum US\$20

Haiti

Haiti is probably more expensive than you think. Taking into account the occasional taxi fare, a few beers with dinner and a willingness to stay in cheap hotels, those with an eye on their money could just about get by on around US\$50 per day. At the other end of the scale, it's easy to spend over US\$100 a day just on accommodation, especially in Port-au-Prince, where most of the best hotels are based, with another US\$50 for the rest of the day's expenses. Prices for an average-quality midrange hotel hover around US\$60.

Street food costs the equivalent of loose change. A meal in a cheap restaurant will set you back around US\$4, and closer to US\$10 in a midrange

IS HAITI SAFE TO VISIT?

If you were planning a trip to the Caribbean 50 years ago, Haiti would probably have been top of your list. Together with Cuba, Haiti virtually invented tourism to the Caribbean, and Port-au-Prince was one of the most swinging destinations in the Americas. Even up to the 1980s, Haiti's tourism industry was a major earner. But the turmoil of recent years is more likely to have people asking – isn't Haiti too dangerous to visit?

While you should be aware that many government travel advisories continue to counsel against recreational travel to Haiti, the realities on the ground are actually far better than popular media coverage might lead you to expect. The presence on the ground of the UN peacekeepers of MINUSTAH allowed the 2006 elections to pass largely without incident and paved the way for improved political stability. It's still essential to keep your eyes on the news however; demonstrations over skyrocketing prices turned violent briefly in early 2008. But the biggest concern has always been the threat of violent crime and kidnapping. MINUSTAH operations since 2006 have tackled Haiti's gang problem head-on, breaking up the power of the gangs and largely stanching kidnappings (it's important to note that kidnappings were almost exclusively targeted against rich Haitians rather than foreigners.) At the start of 2008, Port-au-Prince and Haiti in general had a far lower violent crime and murder rate than nearby Jamaica, with its prosperous tourist industry. (For more-specific advice, see p293 and p344.)

One thing to bear in mind is that the country's poverty and broken infrastructure can make traveling here more akin to visiting a developing country than the Americas. But Haitians deplore the media image of their country as being in constant anarchy, and the vast majority of visitors are pleasantly surprised at how calm and welcoming Haiti really is.

place. At the best restaurants (such as those in Pétienville) it's easy to spend US\$40 once you include wine.

Hiring a car is expensive. Roads are poor, so hire leans towards the 4WD end of the market. Typical prices are US\$70 per day for a saloon, double that for a 4WD. Buses are cheap, however – the longest bus trip is never going to top US\$12, although a comfortable ride isn't always guaranteed.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic that independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Many visitors to the DR will be staying in all-inclusive resorts. If you're among this number, it's definitely worth making the effort to eat and drink outside the resort if you can. Most all-inclusive places are foreign-owned, and most of the money spent at them is repatriated to the parent country rather than the DR. Wages inside the resorts can also be low. Tipping staff and spending money outside the resort ensures that more of your money benefits the local economy. When outside, it's best to have a relaxed attitude to being called a *gringo* or *gringa* – these are generic terms for foreigners, not an insult (the Haitian equivalent is being hailed as a *blanc*, no matter the color of your skin).

When on an excursion – whether that's diving, snorkeling, kayaking or hiking – ask your guide as many questions as possible about the environmental policies of the company, in order to persuade tour operators that these issues are of interest to tourists.

In Haiti, it is many years since the country enjoyed tourists visiting in any numbers, and 'sustainable tourism' is yet to make an appearance on the

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor travel generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening; two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow jetsetters to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

radar. On one level, any form of tourism is worthwhile – injecting money into the local economy and, just as importantly, coming home and being able to challenge others' preconceptions of this so-called nightmare republic. On the ground, day-to-day challenges are more gritty. Haiti is in environmental crisis, and you might spend hours agonizing about throwing your trash in the street, only to find out that that's exactly what your hotel does with the rubbish you saved to dispose of in your room. At the very least, be aware that access to water and electricity can be problematic at the best of times, so try to avoid wasting these precious resources. Using the filtered drinking water provided by all hotels and restaurants does at least minimize adding to the country's plastic bottle mountain.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The intrigues of its history and the attractions of Vodou have blessed Haiti with a richer body of travel literature than the DR.

A sobering novel by young Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* takes as its backdrop the horrific slaughter of Haitians by Dominican soldiers in 1937 – excellent reading whichever country you're visiting. Danticat's *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel* is a charming and thoughtful meditation on growing up, Haitian history and finally attending Jacmel's most famous celebration after being banned as child.

Part travelogue, part memoir, *The Best Nightmare on Earth* by Herbert Gold recounts over 37 years of living in Haiti, from the rise of Papa Doc to the eve of Prosper Avril in 1990. It vividly captures Haiti with the charm and occasionally wearied air that only a deep love affair can produce.

Dead Man in Paradise by JB Mackinnon is an intriguing blend of travelogue, history and reportage with the author, the nephew of a priest murdered decades ago during the Trujillo regime, trying to piece together the stories of the surviving actors in this unsolved crime.

TOP PICKS



FESTIVALS

The DR and Haiti are full of wild festivals to watch or participate in, which are almost always accompanied by a great deal of drinking and dancing:

- Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti (January–February; p322) – enjoy the street theatre of the festival’s masks and costumes
- Carnival parade in La Vega, Dominican Republic (January–February; p223) – the DR’s biggest show
- International Sand Castle Competition in Cabarete, Haiti (February; p189) – more than just buckets and spades
- Carnival in Port-au-Prince, Haiti (February; p298) – the biggest and noisiest festival on the island
- Fet Gédé, Haiti (November; p346) – the Vodou festival of the dead is held in cemeteries across Haiti at midnight
- Saut d’Eau Vodou pilgrimage, Haiti (July; p313) – devotees bathe under a sacred waterfall

SHOPPING

Forget the cheap stuff that touts push to the crowds fresh off the cruise boat – you might find yourself worrying about your luggage allowance with the top-notch souvenirs that the DR and Haiti have to offer. Here’s our list of top shopping items:

- A canvas by an upcoming Haitian artist from the vibrant galleries of Port-au-Prince (p305)
- Oil drums recycled into intricate sculptures by the carved-iron artists of Haiti’s Croix des Bouquets (p311)
- The best in Dominican cigars from Santiago (p208), the stogie capital of Hispaniola
- Brightly painted papier-mâché boxes and masks from Jacmel (p324), the home of Haitian handicrafts
- Dominican amber – head for Puerto Plata (p173) to find out how to pick the best
- A bottle of rum (Brugal or Bermudez in the DR, Barbancourt in Haiti) to help you try to re-create those sunny Caribbean punches once you’re back home
- Dominican merengue and Haitian *compas* CDs picked up at any street market to help with the ambience when pouring the aforementioned rum

BEACHES

The Caribbean is heaven for beach bunnies, and these are some of our favorite beaches to help you laze your holiday away:

- Playa Grande, Dominican Republic (p193) – one of the most beautiful (and undeveloped) beaches in the DR
- Bávaro and Punta Cana, Dominican Republic (p131) – home to the DR’s top all-inclusive resorts
- Playa Limón, Dominican Republic (p137) – a short ferry hop and bus ride from Samaná, this deserted spot is still far enough from the action to let you indulge your Robinson Crusoe fantasies
- Cabarete, Dominican Republic (p184) – combine wind, sand and surf at this wind- and kitesurfing hot spot
- Playa Rincón, Dominican Republic (p151) – with kilometers of nearly white sand framed by huge coconut trees, this has been named one of the top 10 beaches in the Caribbean by *Condé Nast* magazine
- Cormier Plage, Haiti (p338) – enjoy gold sand and white Atlantic rollers while dining on the finest seafood

Alan Cambeira's *Azucar! The Story of Sugar* is a fascinating novel that portrays the human toll of sugar production in the DR, with much of the information, descriptions and events based on real events.

Ian Thomson's *Bonjour Blanc* is one of the most entertaining and well-researched travel books written about Haiti. Visiting during the turmoil of the early 1990s, this often hair-raising account offers meticulous historical detail and vivid portraits, making it an essential read.

For more reading suggestions, see the marginal reviews in the History, Culture and Environment chapters.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There are a number of excellent websites providing general information about the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and traveling there.

Debbie's Dominican Republic Travel Pages (www.debbiesdominicantravel.com) This popular site contains a wealth of detailed firsthand reviews of tourist destinations from resorts and golfing to dive sites.

Dominican Republic One (www.dr1.com) This portal is the first place to visit for all matters Dominican, from daily news and business reports to a broad selection of travel information.

Haiti Info (www.haiti-info.com) Pulling stories straight off the newswires, this website will keep you abreast of the current situation in Haiti prior to your visit.

Haiti Innovation (www.haitiinnovation.org) This blog, which runs a commentary on the state of development and aid in Haiti, makes fascinating reading for anyone volunteering in Haiti.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) The dedicated Caribbean branch of our Thorn Tree forum is one of the best places to ask questions and get up-to-date traveler's reports on the DR and Haiti.

Itineraries

ONE ISLAND, TWO COUNTRIES

HISPANIOLA FULL CIRCLE

Three Weeks

Start in **Santo Domingo** (p72), exploring the old colonial center. Next take a car southwest to the Taíno cave paintings of **San Cristobal** (p113), then southeast to the beaches at **Bávaro** and **Punta Cana** (p131), the hub of Dominican tourism.

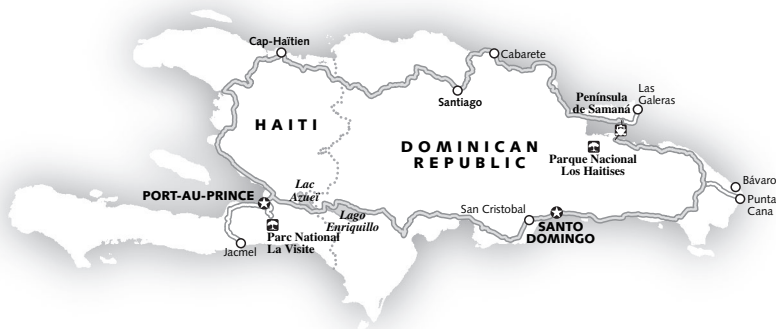
It's a fair way to **Península de Samaná** (p142), but **whale watching** (p145) is a definite highlight. Alternatively, hike or boat around the beaches of **Las Galeras** (p150), or explore the mangroves of **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (p140).

Next up, the water-sports mecca **Cabarete** (p184). Unwind with a cigar in **Santiago** (p204), then bus directly to **Cap-Haitien** (p331), Haiti's second city. From here visit the **Citadelle** (p337), Hispaniola's most remarkable historic site.

Bump over mountains and along the coast to **Port-au-Prince** (p288), taking a few days to explore this vibrant urban mass. It's a short drive to the pleasant southern port of **Jacmel** (p317), the handicrafts capital of Haiti, and a short hop from the waterfalls of **Bassins-Bleu** (p321).

Back in Port-au-Prince, freshen up with a day in the mountains in **Parc National La Visite** (p310). Finally, take a direct bus back to Santo Domingo, or break the journey with a spot of bird- and crocodile-watching on the cross-border **Lac Azueï** (p313)/**Lago Enriquillo** (p240).

This three-week odyssey covers the pick of Hispaniola, and will show you the great contrasts between the two countries. It can be done in either direction, but we'd recommend tackling the DR first, building up to the slightly tougher challenge of Haiti.



CLASSIC ROUTES

DOMINICAN CIRCUIT

Three Weeks

Start with a couple of days exploring **Santo Domingo** (p72), hitting the Zona Colonial, the Faro a Colón and the essential Dominican experiences of baseball, cockfighting and dancing to merengue.

On day three head to **Jarabacoa** (p212). Visit the waterfalls in the afternoon, with white-water rafting or canyoning the next day.

Head north to **Cabarete** (p184), which has world-class water sports and mountain biking. There's great diving and beaches in nearby **Sosúa** (p178) and **Río San Juan** (p192) – enough to keep you happy for two or three days.

Next you're off to the **Península de Samaná** (p142). If it's mid-January to mid-March, go whale watching (p145). Otherwise take a boat trip to **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (p140) to see the mangroves and cave paintings, or visit the waterfall near **El Limón** (p145). Spend another two or three days hiking or boating to the beaches around **Las Galeras** (p150). For a bit more nightlife, base yourself in **Las Terrenas** (p155) instead.

Allow for some relaxing beach time. The southeast is perfect – we'd go for either deserted **Playa Limón** (p137) or perennially popular **Bávaro** and **Punta Cana** (p131).

Return to Santo Domingo. Renting a car lets you hit several sites easily. To the southwest there are Taino cave paintings in **San Cristobal** (p113), a spectacular drive **south of Barahona** (p233), and crocodiles in **Lago Enriquillo** (p240). Spend a night or two before finishing in Santo Domingo.

Taking in the best the DR has to offer, this route follows a large clockwise loop, starting and ending in Santo Domingo, and hitting Jarabacoa, Cabarete, the Península de Samaná, Bávaro and Punta Cana, and the southwest.



HAITI UNCOVERED

Two Weeks

Everything starts in **Port-au-Prince** (p288). Spend several days here to take in everything that Haiti's capital offers, from the vibrant arts scene to the music and the best in tropical 'gingerbread' architecture.

Take a bus north to Haiti's second city, **Cap-Haïtien** (p331). From here it's a perfect day trip to the towering mountaintop **Citadelle** and **Sans Souci Palace** (p337), the most spectacular historic sights in the country. You can look for French colonial remains to the east at **Fort Liberté** (p339) or simply head back to Cap-Haïtien and the gorgeous Atlantic beaches of **Cormier Plage** (p338) and **Labadie** (p338).

To save time, you can fly back to Port-au-Prince, then stretch your legs with a hike through **Parc National La Visite** (p310). If you want, you can walk almost to the Caribbean Sea and catch onward transport to **Jacmel** (p317) – alternatively, it's just a couple of hours' drive from Port-au-Prince.

Jacmel is worth a few days, taking in the old port architecture, the myriad handicrafts shops and an excursion to the waterfalls of **Bassins-Bleu** (p321). If you can get here for Carnival in February, so much the better.

There's beach-lounging to be had further west along the coast, either at gorgeous **Île-à-Vache** (p325) or the vast sandy expanses of **Port Salut** (p326).

Wrap your trip up back in Port-au-Prince. Spend a morning seeing the iron sculptors of **Croix des Bouquets** (p311), picking up the last of the souvenirs with plenty of time for a final rum punch before heading to the airport.

To get the essential Haitian experience, this itinerary has you based in and out of Port-au-Prince, exploring the capital and surrounds, while heading further afield to take in both the historic northern coast and the laid-back charms of the south.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

FAR FROM THE DOMINICAN CROWDS

Two Weeks

Start and finish in Santo Domingo for this trip, which reveals the corners of the DR that many tourists ignore. You'll take in less-visited destinations like the southwest and Pico Duarte, and where you do follow the tourist route, it's for less-common sights and activities.

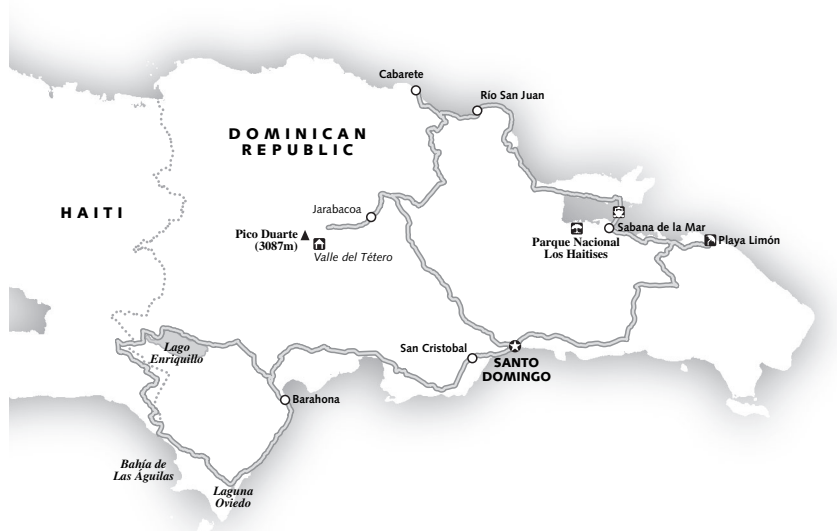
From **Santo Domingo** (p72), rent a car and drive southwest to **Barahona** (p231), stopping in San Cristobal to see the Taíno **cave paintings** (p114). Spend the next day visiting **Laguna Oviedo** (p236) or **Bahía de las Águilas** (p237) – the drive alone is spectacular. The following day head to **Lago Enriquillo** (p240), the lowest point in the Caribbean and home to iguanas, crocodiles and lots of bird life.

Returning to Santo Domingo, catch a bus to **Jarabacoa** (p212). Take a day for rafting or canyoning, but you're really here to climb **Pico Duarte** (p217), the highest peak in the Caribbean. The standard trip is three days, but consider arranging a side trip to beautiful **Valle de Tétero** (p218), which adds two days.

From the mountains, head north and east along the coast to **Río San Juan** (p192). There are two terrific beaches nearby, and some of the best snorkeling and diving on the north coast. Alternatively, consider stopping at beach town **Cabarete** (p184) along the way. Although touristy, Cabarete has more restaurants, hotels and outdoors options, and a livelier nightlife than Río San Juan.

Leave early so you can get across the bay to Sabana de la Mar and **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (p140) in one day. Visit the lodge at the entrance to the park for a tour featuring mangrove forests and Taíno paintings.

Your last stop should be **Playa Limón** (p137), an isolated beach and lagoon where you'll have kilometers of coastline to yourself. You'll return to Santo Domingo feeling totally refreshed.



TAILORED TRIPS

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC FOR KIDS

All-inclusive resorts are tailor-made for families; if all you want to do is splash about in the water, you could do worse than book at the resorts at **Bávaro** and **Punta Cana** (p131). Many are particularly child-friendly, and activities include go-karts, bowling, sailing trips and parasailing. Resorts also offer tours to local sights; for more independence, rent a car and head out on your own.

Spend time in **Santo Domingo** (p72) first. There's a great children's museum and the national aquarium; the Columbus connection is great for inspiring games of explorers (see p89). From Santo Domingo it's an easy day trip to **Boca Chica** (p105), with its pretty beach of shallow, calm water that's ideal for youngsters. Further east, **Bayahibe** (p123) is a tiny town on the edge of a national park with a number of excursion options, from package tours of an island beach to snorkeling trips to get the kids 'finding Nemo.'

Further afield, kids and adults alike should adore shouting 'There she blows!' while **whale watching** (p145) in Samaná (between mid-January and mid-March). If it's more activity your family hankers for, the windsurfing schools in **Cabarete** (p184) offer special courses for children, while kiteboarding might engage the most truculent of teenagers. At **Jarabacoa** (p212) you can take the family white-water rafting and even dinosaur hunting at the spectacular waterfalls where part of *Jurassic Park* was filmed.



NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Starting in the DR, head southwest from Santo Domingo to **Barahona** (p231), a good base for bird-watching trips to Laguna Oviado in **Parque Nacional Jaragua** (p236), and spotting crocodiles and iguanas at Lago Enriquillo in **Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos** (p240).

Head north to Jarabacoa, gateway to **Parques Nacionales Armando Bermúdez** and **José del Carmen Ramírez** (p217). The two parks cover much of the DR's central mountain range, including Pico Duarte, the highest peak (3087m) in the Caribbean. From Pico Duarte continue northwest to **Parque Nacional Monte Cristi** (p200), where you can snorkel amid pristine coral reefs and spot rare manatees.

It's a long cross-country drive to **Parque Nacional Los Haitises** (p140), near Sabana de la Mar. Boat tours of the park take in mangrove forests and Taíno cave paintings. See more cave paintings at **Parque Nacional del Este** (p124) near Bayahibe, on the way back to Santo Domingo.

Traveling over the border to Haiti, base yourself in Port-au-Prince for the pine forests of **Parc National Forêt des Pins** (p313), then trek from mountains to sea through **Parc National La Visite** (p310). Finish the trip with a flight to Cap-Haïtien and take in the sweep of **Parc National Historique La Citadelle** (p337), with its breathtaking fortress of the Citadelle.



HISTORY'S FOOTSTEPS

Home to the first European settlements in the New World, both the DR and Haiti are rich in historical sites.

Almost overflowing with colonial history, Santo Domingo (p72) is the ideal place to start, and you can spend several days soaking up the Zona Colonial, the first cathedral in the Americas and more besides.

Just southwest of the capital is an area rich in cave paintings executed by Hispaniola's original Taíno inhabitants. **San Cristobal** (p113) is the more popularly visited site, although **Reserva Antropológica El Pomier** (p114) is more extensive. In the north, the **Parque Nacional La Isabela** (p198) hosts the site of Columbus' second attempt to settle in Hispaniola (the location of the first remains unknown).

Traveling from the DR to Haiti, the sites get richer still. **Port-au-Prince** (p288) has the anchor of Columbus' *Santa Maria* in its national museum, and although there's little evidence of the colonial period on offer, the richness of the Victorian **gingerbread architecture** (see boxed text, p297) is a joy to explore. Above the city, **Fermathe** (p309) has two forts impressively guarding the coastline.

Heading north, stop along the **Côte des Arcadins** (p314) to explore an old sugar plantation-turned-museum, before continuing north to **Cap-Haïtien** (p331). You've saved the best until last – the massive World Heritage-listed fortress of the **Citadelle** and the ruins of **Sans Souci** (p337), 200-year-old symbols of Haitian pride at independence, and a fitting point to end the trip.



On the Road



PAUL CLAMMER Coordinating Author

Here I am near the end of my trip, at Fort Jacques (p309) in the clean air above Port-au-Prince, wondering how that little notebook is going to be transformed into a guide, and trying to calculate how many more rum punches I can fit in before I head for the airport...



MICHAEL GROSBERG This photo was taken after a cramped six-hour ride on a *gua-gua* (local bus) from the Península de Samaná to Santo Domingo (p72). We were stranded with heavy bags, a scrum of people were pushing their way on and there were no cabs in sight, but a generous stranger grabbed our things, put them in his car and drove us to a café.



JENS PORUP This photo was taken at the bird-watching platform on Cayo de las Iguanas in the middle of Laguna Oviedo (p236) in the southwest.

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