

Welcome to the Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic is one of the Caribbean's most geographically diverse countries, with stunning mountain scenery, desert scrublands, evocative colonial architecture and beaches galore.

Coastal Country

Hundreds of kilometers of coastline define the Dominican Republic (DR) – some of it white-sand beaches shaded by rows of palm trees, other parts lined dramatically with rocky cliffs, wind-swept dunes or serene mangrove lagoons. Whether it's fishing villages where the shoreline is used for mooring boats or indulgent tourist playgrounds with aquamarine waters, the sea is the common denominator. Some of the bays and coves where pirates once roamed are the temporary home of thousands of migrating humpback whales, and part of an extensive network of parks and preserves safeguarding the country's natural patrimony.

Peaks & Valleys

Much of the DR is distinctly rural: driving through the vast fertile interior, you'll see cows and horses grazing alongside the roads and trucks and burros loaded down with fresh produce. Further inland you'll encounter vistas reminiscent of the European Alps, rivers carving their way through lush jungle and stunning waterfalls. Four of the five highest peaks in the Caribbean rise above the fertile lowlands surrounding Santiago and remote deserts stretch through the southwest, giving the DR a physical and cultural complexity not found on other islands.

Past & Present

The country's roller-coaster past is writ large in the physical design of its towns and cities. Santo Domingo's Zona Colonial exudes romance with its beautifully restored monasteries and cobblestone streets where conquistadors once roamed. The crumbling gingerbread homes of Puerto Plata and Santiago remain from more prosperous eras, and scars from decades of misrule are marked by monuments where today people gather to celebrate. New communities have arisen only a few kilometers from the ruins where Christopher Columbus strode and where the indigenous Taíno people left traces of their presence carved onto rock walls.

People & Culture

The social glue of the DR is the all-night merengue that blasts from *colmados* (combined corner stores and bars) and this is true everywhere from the capital Santo Domingo to crumbling San Pedro de Macoris to Puerto Plata, where waves crash over the Malecón. Dominicans greatly appreciate their down time and really know how to party, as can be seen at Carnival celebrations held throughout the country and each town's own distinctive fiesta. These events are windows into the culture, so take the chance to join the fun and elaborate feasts.



Why I Love the Dominican Republic

By Ashley Harrell, Writer

Although the idyllic beaches and all-included rum cocktails of Punta Cana have their place, for me, the DR is about other things – the wizened men puffing cigars and slapping down dominoes by the fire atop Pico Duarte, or dancing the merengue inside the crumbling ruins of the New World's first monastery. I've never felt so inspired as when I zipped through desert hills on a scooter, past grazing goats and drying laundry, headed for a faraway fishing village where some ambitious expat started a kitesurfing school.

For more about our writers, see p320

Above: Bike riding on a dirt road