



# Understand Haiti

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The aftershocks – humanitarian, economic and political – of the 2010 earthquake continue to reverberate throughout Haiti. How is the country coping?

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Taino Indians, Columbus, a slave revolution against the French dictatorship: how Haiti's patchwork history shaped the country.

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From painting and music to literature and tropical architecture: the many faces of Haitian cultural life.

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A primer to the Haitian third of the island of Hispaniola.

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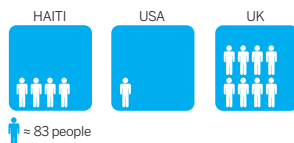
A national religion richer and more interesting than popular misconceptions of 'voodoo' could ever have you believe.

## **HAITI EARTHQUAKE . . . . .344**

The earthquake of January 2010 is possibly the most tragic event ever to have befallen the impoverished island nation.



## population per sq mile



# Haiti Today

- » Country area: 27,560 sq km
- » Population: 9.72 million
- » Population under 14 years old: 38%
- » Life expectancy at birth: 62 years
- » GDP per capita: US\$1200

Haiti is a country that is frequently viewed by outsiders in clichés, as if the country was little more than a grab-bag of negative images: ‘voodoo’, coups, boat people and a peculiar idea that somehow the country is doomed to failure. For some, the earthquake of January 12, 2010, only compounded this picture. But while they recognize their country’s travails, for Haitians, their national identity is something they are equally proud of. Haiti’s history as the first independent black republic is something to be continuously celebrated, and that original struggle for independence remains a powerful wellspring of national inspiration.

## The Great Population Divide

Life in Haiti has always been sharply divided between the tiny urban elite and the poor rural bulk of the population.

Most Haitians are peasants practicing subsistence farming. Beans, rice, sweet potatoes, maize, bananas or coffee are grown on small plots, while along the coast fishermen take their catch from simple sailboats. Rural life is hard. Electricity is often a distant aspiration and food is cooked over charcoal, the production of which is a major cause of environmental damage. Food insecurity is high, and usually only two meals a day are eaten. Community spirit isn’t wanted for, and large-scale jobs are tackled by communal work teams called *kombits*.

According to city dwellers, the rural poor live in the *peyi andeyò* (outside country), totally removed from the economic and political levers of power. Peasants are either mocked as yokels or mythologized in folkloric art and dances as the noble poor. But as demands on the exhausted land have reached breaking point, increasing numbers of peasants have sought a better life in Port-au-Prince. The result is the

## Top Books

- » *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a moving debut novel by Edwidge Danticat, the queen of Haitian letters.
- » *The Comedians*, by Graham Green, is an acid-sharp satire of Haiti under ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier.
- » *Bonjour Blanc*, by Ian Thomson, remains one of the best travelogues to Haiti published.

## Top Food Tips

- » A bottle of Barbanourt Five Star rum always impresses as a present for friends.
- » Haiti’s ‘Madam Francis’ mango is one of the sweetest and juiciest.
- » Add some chili heat with Ti-Malice sauce.