

# Dominican Republic



## Map



## Background

- **Land and Climate:** The Dominican Republic occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island Hispaniola, which it shares with Haiti. Covering 48,731 sq km, it is about twice the size of New Hampshire. The central mountain range, Cordillera Central, boasts the highest point in the Caribbean, Pico Duarte, at a little more than 10,000 feet (3,048 meters). The Cibao Valley lies in the heart of the country and is the major agricultural area. Weather generally is tropical, hot, and humid, especially along southern and eastern coasts. Temperatures average in the high 90s or above during summer months, with August being the hottest. A dry, desert-like climate, due to deforestation and little rainfall, prevails in western and southwestern regions. Rainy seasons, when the temperature drops to the 70s, may vary in different parts of the country, but they generally run from December to March.

## People

- **Population:** The Dominican Republic's population of roughly 9.4 million is growing at a rate of about 1.5 percent. More than one-third of the population is younger than age 16. The rural population is steadily decreasing through migration to cities. Mixed-race people account for 73 percent of the total population; 16 percent is Caucasian, and 11 percent is black. The mixed-race group is a combination of descendents of Spaniards and other Europeans, West African slaves, and perhaps some indigenous peoples. A Haitian minority is included in the black population. Additionally, more than one million Dominicans live full- or part-time in New York City, U.S.A.
- **Language and Greeting:** The official language is Spanish, but Caribbean phrases, accents, and regional expressions give Dominican Spanish a distinct personality. For example, when eating, people request *un chin* instead of the Spanish *un poquito* (a little bit) of something. Many people drop the *s* at the end of words, turning *dos* (two) into *do'*. Cibao Valley residents, or *Cibaeños*, and inhabitants of Santo Domingo, or *capitaleños*, may pronounce the *r*, *l*, or *i* differently. One might not greet a stranger on the street, but one would never enter a room without greeting each person. Nor would a person leave without saying good-bye to everyone. Formal introductions are rare, but professional titles are used to address respected persons. Older and more prominent people may be addressed as *Don* (for men) or *Doña* (for women), with or without their first names.
- **Religion:** Dominicans are 95 percent Catholic by record, but a much smaller number regularly attends church or strictly follows doctrine. Especially in rural areas, Catholic traditions are sometimes combined with local practices and beliefs. Although Dominicans are fairly secular, Catholic traditions are evident in daily life. Many houses contain artwork portraying the Virgin Mary and other saints, thought to protect the home's occupants. Some children are taught to “ask blessings” of their parents and other relatives upon seeing them. They might say *Bendición, tía* (Bless me, aunt), and the response is *Dios te bendiga* (May God bless you). Evangelical Christian churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other denominations are also present throughout the country.
- **General Attitude:** Dominicans are warm, friendly, and gregarious. They are very curious about others and forthright in asking personal questions. Children are rarely shy. *Machismo*—the desire of men to prove their manliness or superiority—permeates society, especially among rural and low-income groups. A proud, aggressive attitude is admired in sports, games, and business. Many people have a sharp entrepreneurial sense, and business etiquette can be aggressive in tourist areas. Relationships are more important than schedules, so being late for appointments or spending time socializing instead of working is socially acceptable. *Confianza* (trust) is highly valued and not quickly or easily gained by outsiders. Borrowing is common, though an item may be forgotten and never returned. Most people are generous and helpful. Economic, social, and political class divisions, most evident in cities, define individuals and favor historically prominent families. Light skin and smooth hair are preferred over strong African features.

- **Personal Appearance:** Dominicans take pride in their personal appearance and place importance on dressing well. They draw on New York fashions, wearing the latest dresses, jeans, and athletic shoes. Clothes tend to be dressy and are always clean and well pressed. People often prefer bright colors and shiny fabrics. Jeans and short skirts are acceptable for women in urban areas, but dresses or skirts and blouses are more common in the countryside. Shorts are almost never worn, no matter what the temperature. Professional men wear business suits or the traditional *chacabana*, a white shirt worn over dark trousers, and well-shined shoes. Children are also dressed up, especially for church or visiting.

## Lifestyle

- **Diet and Eating:** If Dominicans do not eat rice and beans at midday, they feel they have not eaten. Most meals feature rice along with such favorites as *habichuelas* (beans) and *yuca* (cassave). *Yuca* may be boiled, battered and deep-fried, or baked into rounds of crisp cracker bread called *casabe*. *Plátanos* (plantains) and bananas are plentiful. *Bacalao* (dried fish, usually cod) is eaten in some areas; fresh fish is eaten only along the coast. Food is generally not spicy. The national dish is *sancocho*, a rich vegetable-and-meat stew served on special occasions. The main meal, *comida*, is served at midday and often lasts two hours. Families prefer eating at home. Urban workers unable to return home may eat at inexpensive cafés or buy from vendors. *Desayuno* (breakfast) usually is light: sweetened coffee and bread. People in urban areas often eat a bit more. *Cena* (the evening meal) is also light, often not more than a snack or leftovers from *comida*.
- **Recreation:** Playing dominoes is a national pastime. Outdoor tables in front of homes, bars, and rural *colmados* (neighborhood markets) are surrounded by men who play for hours, especially on Sundays. Outdoor players are almost exclusively men, but everyone—including young children—may play at home. Cockfighting is another national pastime, and cockfight gambling stakes can be high. The lottery also has high participation. Baseball is the most popular sport, and many Dominicans have become famous major league players in the United States and Canada. Boys also enjoy playing basketball, and boys and girls enjoy playing volleyball. Strolling in parks, visiting friends, and watching television are popular activities.
- **Holidays:** National holidays include New Year's Day, *Día de los Reyes* (Day of the Kings, 6 Jan.), *Nuestra Señora de la Alta Gracia* (Our Lady of High Gratitude, 21 Jan.), Duarte's Day (26 Jan.), Independence Day (27 Feb.), Easter, Labor Day (1 May), Corpus Christi, Restoration of Independence (16 Aug.), *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes* (Our Lady of Mercies, 24 September), Columbus Day (12 Oct.), and Christmas. Urban families go to the beach or mountains during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week before Easter). *Carnaval* is celebrated for several weeks in the early spring with costume parades, complete with masked participants hitting spectators with inflated, hardened pig bladders, and other festivities. Gifts are not exchanged at Christmas, but they may be given to children on 6 January. The government may call special holidays to celebrate an event or project completion.

- **Commerce and Currency:** Business hours vary, but most establishments open around 8 or 9 am. Close between noon and 2pm, and open again until 5 or 6 pm. Banks close at 3 pm. The official currency is the Dominican Republic Peso. The exchange rate is 1 US dollar to 35.59 Dominican R. Peso.

## Society

- **Transportation and Communication:** Main roads are paved and heavily traveled. Rural roads are often unpaved and may be impassable during rainy seasons. Public transportation includes motorcycle taxis, larger buses, or economical vans or buses called *guaguas* that are used for local or long-distance trips. Pickup trucks or small vans travel between rural villages, carrying passengers, animals, and cargo in a single load. Urban Dominicans travel by *conchos*, informal taxis that follow certain routes. Private cars are expensive but by no means rare. Motorcycles are more common. Telephone service is available throughout the country, and middle- and upper-class families have phones. Daily newspapers are read widely. Postal service is slow and unreliable. Most businesses use private messenger services. Private radio and television stations broadcast regionally and nationally.
- **Health:** Public hospitals provide free care, but private doctors are preferred when affordable. Public institutions tend to be poorly equipped and understaffed; families must provide bedding and food for admitted patients. Clinics are better equipped but can be costly. Village health care workers have enough training to administer basic services, but rural areas often have no doctors or medicine, and people must travel elsewhere for care. Many people still consult *curanderos* (native healers). Lack of early treatment and preventive care is a major concern. Vaccination campaigns are helping fight disease, but maladies such as malaria, intestinal parasites, and dengue fever pose serious challenges.