



EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

Dominican Republic 



About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 is the “Culture General” section, which provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on the Greater Antilles.

Part 2 is the “Culture Specific” section, which describes unique cultural features of Dominican society. It applies culture-general



concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing

constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include

kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family



and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are “people like me” or “people not like me.” Usually, we assume that those in the “like me” category share our perspectives and values.

12 Domains of Culture



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This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It

helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.



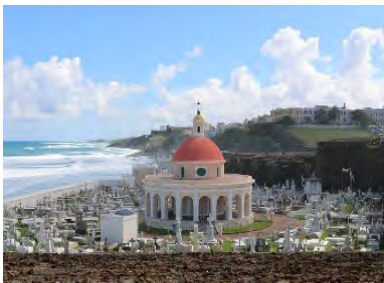
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of

what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

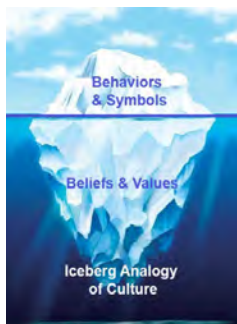
While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters.

Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model



for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through the Greater Antilles, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

The Greater Antilles comprise the Cayman Islands, Cuba, the Dominican Republic (DR), Haiti, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico (PR). The region's first inhabitants likely arrived by canoe from Central or South America around 5,000 years ago. Around 750 BC, the Ciboney people began arriving, then were replaced or absorbed by the Taíno beginning around 400 BC. Taíno groups throughout the Greater Antilles shared a common lifestyle, social structure, and languages. Beginning around the 1st century AD, they sometimes experienced violent confrontations with the Carib peoples, who were spreading through other parts of the

Caribbean. By the late 15th century, the Greater Antilles were home to some six million people.

The region's historical trajectory was permanently altered with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. After landing on Cuba, Columbus

sailed to Hispaniola (the name of the island shared by Haiti and the DR), where the conquerors founded Spain's first permanent New World settlement in 1496. From there, they secured their hold on other Caribbean islands, while mounting expeditions to Mexico and Central and South America and subjugating those regions. In subsequent years, Cuba and PR attained prominence as way stations for Spanish ships transporting New World gold back to Spain.



Over the years, the region's indigenous populations were almost completely wiped out due to conflict, disease, famine, and their exploitation in forced labor systems. To fulfill labor requirements in mines and later on sugar plantations, the Spanish began importing enslaved Africans.

Soon, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands began to challenge Spain's hold on the region. Besides outright attacks and invasions, these powers sanctioned pirate attacks on Spanish ships. In the late 17th century, Spain ceded Jamaica and the Cayman Islands to Britain and Haiti to France. The colonies became a source of important cash crops such as coffee, sugar, cacao, indigo, and tobacco, while Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba in particular imported additional enslaved Africans. Between 1794 and 1886, slavery was gradually abolished across the region. Nevertheless, societies continued to be highly stratified by race, ethnicity, and class.



A 1791 slave revolt in Haiti culminated in its 1804 independence. Shortly after the DR declared its independence from Spain in 1821, Haiti invaded and then occupied the DR for 2 decades, engendering a deep distrust between the neighbors that continues today. The DR expelled the Haitians in 1844, then confirmed its independence in 1865 following a period of renewed Spanish control. In 1863, the Cayman Islands became a dependency of Jamaica, which was still administered by the British. Meanwhile, Spain retained control of PR and Cuba through the 19th century despite intermittent wars of independence beginning in 1868. US intervention in the conflict in 1898 prompted the brief Spanish-American War, which ended with the US acquiring control of Cuba and PR.

Despite a treaty affirming Cuba's independence, the US occupied the country, notably establishing a military base at Guantánamo Bay, which it retains today. In 1902, Cuba formally

achieved independence. Meanwhile, PR has remained a dependency of the US since 1898.

The US intervened in the DR and Haiti in the early 20th century, controlling both countries' economies and occupying them in the 1910s-30s. Subsequently, the DR and Haiti continued to experience significant political instability, eventually becoming dictatorships under Rafael Trujillo (DR, from 1930-61) and François ("Papa Doc") Duvalier and Jean Claude ("Baby Doc") Duvalier (Haiti, from 1957-71 and 1971-86).

In 1962, Jamaica attained its independence but remained a part of the British Commonwealth. By contrast, the Cayman Islands chose to remain a British dependency. Since then, Jamaica has experienced stability through periods of politically motivated violence, and more recently, an increase in crime related to illegal drugs. In the last decades, the Cayman Islands have transformed into a significant offshore financial center.



In 1959, Fidel Castro and other revolutionaries overthrew the Cuban government, establishing a communist regime and cultivating close ties with the USSR. Nationalizing all private property, the regime confiscated American-owned real estate and businesses, prompting retaliatory measures, notably the US' unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. Though it has implemented significant social, political, and economic reforms since then, Cuba remains a totalitarian communist state.

Hurricanes in 2008 and 2016 and a massive 2010 earthquake caused considerable loss of life and infrastructure damage in Haiti. Recovery since then has been slow, with Haiti remaining politically and economically fragile. A 2017 hurricane also caused considerable infrastructure damage in PR.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social

relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. The Spanish conquest and European colonial rule dramatically changed society in the Greater Antilles. Further, the decimation of the indigenous population and import of tens of thousands of enslaved Africans permanently altered the region's ethnic and racial makeup.

The Greater Antilles have diverse systems of government. The Cayman Islands are a self-governing overseas territory of the United Kingdom (UK) whose monarch, King Charles III, is chief-of-state and represented on the Cayman Islands by an appointed governor. Accordingly, Caymanians are UK citizens. By contrast, Cuba is a unitary socialist republic, with the Communist Party granted a predominant role in administration and the government exercising direct control or influence over most aspects of life. Fidel Castro remained Cuba's leader until he passed power to his brother, Raúl in 2008, citing ill health. In 2018, Raúl Castro was replaced by Miguel Díaz-Canel, his hand-picked successor.

The DR is a presidential republic with a parliamentary system of government, while Haiti is a semi-presidential republic, meaning executive power is shared by a President and Prime Minister (PM). Haiti indefinitely postponed legislative elections in late 2019. PM Ariel Henry assumed executive responsibilities, including naming cabinet members, following the assassination of President Moïse on 7 July 2021. Henry resigned in April 2024. PM Garry Conille assumed the responsibilities in June 2024.

As a member of the British Commonwealth, Jamaica is an independent constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government. The UK's King Charles III is Jamaica's head-of-state, though actual executive power rests with a PM. Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the US with local self-government. The US President is PR's chief-of-state, and its head-of-government is an elected governor. While Puerto Ricans received US citizenship in 1917,



they have no voting representation in the US Congress and cannot vote in US presidential elections. In fall 2020, some 52% of Puerto Rican voters approved a referendum, seeking immediate admission into the US as a state, but the US Congress has no obligation to consider the matter.

Due to its proximity to the region, the US has historically had



close relations with the Greater Antilles states, occasionally intervening in their economic and political processes but generally supporting their development. Since the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the US has had tense, even adversarial

relations, with Cuba. Under President Obama, US-Cuba affairs experienced a thaw, with the two countries reestablishing diplomatic ties and the US easing some parts of its decades-long economic embargo. However, this stance was reversed under President Trump with new travel and economic restrictions which again have been reversed by President Biden.

The Greater Antilles population largely divides into three groups: people of mixed European, African, and/or indigenous ancestry, whites (people of European descent), and blacks (people of African descent). All three groups are present in large numbers, and some states have citizens with other backgrounds such as East Asians. People of mixed descent comprise the majority of the populations of the DR and Cayman Islands, while some two-thirds of Cubans and three-quarters of Puerto Ricans claim a white identity. By contrast, Haitians and Jamaicans overwhelmingly self-identify as black.

Cuba and Puerto Rico have had negative population growth rates in recent years. The decrease in PR has been especially steep, with many Puerto Ricans relocating to the mainland US in response to ongoing economic recession and natural disasters.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help

preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

The Spanish conquerors introduced Christianity beginning in the late 15th century. As Roman Catholicism spread, eventually becoming nearly universal in Cuba, the Catholic Church became entrenched in colonial life in the DR and PR. In 19th-century independent Haiti, many residents rebelled against the Catholic faith of their French colonizers, leading to its loss of status. In British-controlled Cayman Islands and Jamaica, Protestantism became the predominant Christian form.

Besides Christianity, residents of the Greater Antilles profess other faiths, some based in beliefs and practices that trace to West African traditions. Notable



examples include **Santería** in Cuba, forms of Voodoo in the DR and Haiti, and Obeah and Myalism in Jamaica. Some followers mix these beliefs into their Christian practices, resulting in syncretic (blended) religious forms. Some 1% of Jamaicans are followers of Rastafari, a religious and political movement based in Protestantism and mysticism and associated with reggae music. Jamaica's Jewish community is the oldest in the Western Hemisphere.

The DR is the only Greater Antilles state that names an official religion – Roman Catholicism. While Cuba's Constitution defines it as a secular state, the government nevertheless exercises significant control over most aspects of religious life, restricting the activities of religious leaders and discriminating against some religious groups.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of Greater Antilles societies. Regional inhabitants tend to maintain close connections with family members, supporting them emotionally and financially, while providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. While residence patterns differ somewhat across the region, multiple generations often reside together in one household or live in close proximity. In some regions, female-headed households are common.

Most residents live in urban areas, notably almost all Caymanians, some 94% of Puerto Ricans, and 84% of Dominicans. Over half of Cubans, Haitians and Jamaicans are urban dwellers. Urbanization has changed life in many areas. As

both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available in urban areas, family structures have become more diverse.

Historically, the Cuban government restricted home ownership,

making it difficult for Cubans to change their place of residence. In 2019, Cubans approved a new Constitution that affirms residents' rights to certain types of private property, notably real estate.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The cultures of the Greater Antilles traditionally privilege the male's role as provider and leader. **Machismo**, or masculine behavior and pride, is an important element of male identity in many areas, while women traditionally occupy subordinate domestic roles. Social, economic, and political inequalities remain, even though women have acquired equal rights under the law in areas such as property ownership and suffrage.



While women are involved in politics, the number of women serving in elected offices remains relatively low. Haiti tends to have the lowest female participation. An exception is Cuba, where women won over 53% of such seats in 2023 elections, though few Cuban women occupy the highest government offices.



Female participation in the formal workforce varies. An estimated 60% of Haitian women worked outside the home in 2024 compared to just 32% of Puerto Rican women. Fertility rates also vary, with the Cayman Islands, Cuba, and PR averaging 1.6 or fewer children per woman in recent years compared to 2.4 in Haiti.

Homosexual individuals have attained some rights, though same-sex marriage is legal only in PR. A 2020 presidential decree in Haiti seemed to implicitly legalize such unions, and the Cayman Islands has attempted legalization. Cuba's new Constitution forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity but makes no mention of same-sex unions.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Three of the Greater Antilles states have just one official language: English in the Cayman Islands and Spanish in the DR and Cuba. By contrast, Haiti names both French and Creole (most Haitians' first language) as official languages, and Jamaica names Jamaica Standard English as its official and Jamaican Patois (or Jamaican Creole – the most widely spoken language) as its national language. In Puerto Rico, 2015 legislation declared Spanish the first official language and English the second, though Spanish is the preferred language of some 97% of the population.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This



knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

While education has improved across the

region in recent years, quality and achievement vary. These factors are impacted by political instability, economic inequality, violence, natural disasters, and emigration. Generally, children from poor and rural backgrounds are less likely to attend school and more likely to receive a lower-quality education.

Nevertheless, access to education has increased significantly in recent decades, especially at pre-primary and secondary levels. Enrollment rates at the pre-primary and primary levels are near universal in Cuba, which also has the region's highest secondary enrollment rate of around 84% in 2018. By contrast, Haiti tends to have the lowest enrollment rates. Even if Haitian students do enroll, circumstances often force them to temporarily drop out, meaning primary school graduates are often 4-5 years older than the proscribed age.

Literacy levels reflect the region's varied education landscape. The rate in the Cayman Islands and Cuba approaches 100% and is between 89%-95% for the DR, Jamaica, and PR, though just 62% in Haiti. Government percentage of expenditure on education varies, in 2023, highest was DR at 22% and lowest was Cayman Islands at 15%.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures,

people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in the Greater Antilles, establishing and maintaining relationships often takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner. While regional residents typically agree in advance on scheduled start times, meetings sometimes begin late.

Concepts of personal space differ somewhat from those in the US. During conversations, regional residents often stand closer than most Americans do. They tend to ask questions of a personal nature about family, relationships, and employment as a means of demonstrating polite interest. Men and women typically interact differently than Americans. For example, men shake hands both in greeting and parting, while some women may greet each other with a kiss on the cheek.

The rhythm of daily life typically changes during national holidays. Many holidays reflect Christian traditions, while others mark historical events. For example, the DR, Haiti, and Jamaica celebrate their Independence Days, while PR marks the day Puerto Ricans received US citizenship, and the Cayman Islands observe the King's Birthday. By contrast, several Cuban holidays such as Triumph of the Revolution Day celebrate Fidel Castro's rise to power.



9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. The Greater Antilles' art, architecture, dance, music, and theater reflect European, indigenous, and African influences.

Dance and music infuse daily life in the Greater Antilles and have influenced styles across the Caribbean and Latin America. Notable examples with worldwide renown include **rumba**, **bachata**, and **danzón** from Cuba, **merengue** from the DR, **calypso** and **reggae** from Jamaica, and **reggaetón** from PR. Further,

music is often an integral part of religious rituals, especially in *Santería* and Voodoo.

The most popular sports vary across the region. For example, baseball is favored in Cuba, the DR, and PR, while soccer and cricket are the most widely played sports in Jamaica. The Cayman Islands have been a top destination for scuba divers



since the 1950s. Other common sports across the region include netball, basketball, volleyball, and boxing.

Traditional handicrafts such as weaving, ceramics, leatherwork, and woodcarving have been revived in recent

years. The region has also produced popular novelists and poets, who explore their unique history and cultural heritage.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Cuisine varies across the region based on local products and tastes, though residents tend to rely on many of the same staple ingredients such as rice, beans, pork, goat, and chicken. Seafood is popular along the coastline, often prepared with coconut. Starchy vegetables like plantains and cassava provide low-cost nourishment across the region. Dishes are usually lightly seasoned with coconut, citrus juices, or a small range of herbs and spices.

Health in most of the region has improved in recent decades as evidenced by decreased infant mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents of the region have access to healthcare subsidized by governments, though specialized care is often unavailable. In some regions, residents rely on traditional medicine practitioners for healthcare.

Cuba has the region's most robust healthcare system, which is organized and operated entirely by the state, and medical care is available free or at low cost to all Cubans. Its medical training programs educate students from around the world, and Cuba regularly provides medical assistance to needy countries, most recently during the global coronavirus pandemic.

By contrast, public clinics and hospitals in the DR, Haiti, and Jamaica are often ill-equipped and understaffed, particularly in rural areas. Haiti especially suffers a profound lack of medical professionals, counting just over 2 physicians per 10,000 people, compared to 94 in Cuba and the US average of 36. Relatedly, life expectancy at birth ranges from a high of 82 in PR to a low of 65 in Haiti.



Non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease now cause some 75% of all deaths in all countries. Though HIV infections have reduced by one-third over the last decade, the Caribbean continues to have the world's 2nd highest rate of AIDS/HIV prevalence between 1.9% - 3.1%. In 2023 the disease is most predominant in Haiti (1.7%) and Jamaica (1.3).

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

Under Spanish, French, and British colonial control, regional economies focused predominantly on large sugarcane and coffee plantations using slave labor. Today, most economies export a few commodities or relied heavily on tourism. PR has the largest economy, followed closely by Cuba and the DR, and each of their economies is more than five times as large as those

of Jamaica, Haiti, and the Cayman Islands. None of the states are self-sufficient in food production, typically importing wheat, rice, and other staples.

Although its economy is small, the Cayman Islands has a high standard of living and the Caribbean's highest per capita income. In recent years, tourism has accounted for up to 70% of the Caymans' GDP. The DR and Jamaica, in particular, depend heavily on tourism.

Haiti is the Western Hemisphere's poorest country, with greater than 59% of the population living below the poverty line and some 25% in extreme poverty. About 40% of Haitians labor as small-scale subsistence farmers. As in the DR and Jamaica,



remittances from family members living abroad are an important part of the Haitian economy.

Over the last decades, the Cuban government has gradually loosened

its socialist, centrally planned economic system, inviting some foreign investment and allowing some private enterprise. Today, its economy is predominantly services-oriented, though industry accounts for over 24% of GDP. Notably, Cuba is a world leader in nickel production.

As of mid-2025, the region's economic outlook remains unfavorable, largely due to the slow recovery from the global coronavirus pandemic – namely lower expected growth accompanied by higher inflation and slow employment recovery. Experts expect that economic output will continue to significantly reduce, and poverty levels will rise.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Over recent decades, the Greater Antilles' states have had difficulties maintaining their infrastructure,

experiencing electricity blackouts and telecommunications breakdowns.

Roads forms the primary infrastructure in the region, though quality tends to deteriorate in rural areas. Road safety is a concern throughout the region, due to the presence of pedestrians, bicycles, and horse-drawn vehicles.

While Jamaica ranked 26th in a 2024 worldwide press-freedom ranking, journalists in the DR and Haiti regularly face intimidation and violence. In Cuba, the government controls the flow of all information. It owns all print and broadcast media and occasionally detains or jails journalists who are critical of the government. It also prohibits citizens from purchasing computers without authorization. While 73% the Cuban population was authorized to access the Internet as of 2024, the government censors or blocks the content they see. Haiti (39%) has the region's lowest and DR (89%) the highest Internet penetration rate.

While Haiti has the least-developed telecommunications infrastructure, Cuba has the region's lowest number of mobile phone users – just 70 subscriptions per 100 people as of 2023 compared to 64 in Haiti and a high of 150 in the Cayman Islands.

With no fossil fuel and limited hydroelectric and other renewable sources, most of the region imports oil and gas to meet their growing energy needs. An exception is Jamaica, which has some oil production and is pursuing additional exploration. Since 2000, Cuba has relied on Venezuela for its oil needs, though Venezuela's economic crisis combined with US sanctions on Venezuelan oil have severely reduced Cuba's oil imports recently.



Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Greater Antilles society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in the Dominican Republic.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Sharing the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, the Dominican Republic (DR) experienced tragedy and oppression after the late 15th-century arrival of Spanish conquerors. It then became a focus of colonial competition among Spain, France, and Britain. Following its 1844 independence from Haiti, the DR endured decades of coups, US intervention, and dictatorship. Since holding its first generally free and fair elections in decades in 1996, the DR continues to confront significant governance, security, and social challenges.

Early History

Archaeological finds indicate humans likely first inhabited the island between 4,000 and 6,500 years ago, arriving by canoe from



Central or South America. Between 1000 and 500 BC, the Ciboney people, who were hunter-gatherers and skilled toolmakers, began arriving from South America.

The Taíno: Around 400 BC, the Taíno spread from South America through the Caribbean and absorbed the Ciboney. Over subsequent centuries, they established complex societies, trade networks, and agricultural systems on Hispaniola. Beginning in the 1st century AD, confrontations between the Taíno and new arrivals from South America, the Carib peoples, were sometimes violent. While estimates vary widely, some experts believe Hispaniola was home to up to three million people by the end of the 15th century. They lived in several regions each governed by a **cacique** or community leader.

The Spanish Conquest

After sighting the Bahamas and entering Cuba during his first voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus arrived on the island on December 6, 1492, naming it ***La Isla Española*** ("The Spanish Island"), anglicized as Hispaniola. Warmly greeted by Taíno with gifts of gold jewelry, Columbus erected a fort on the northern coast of present-day Haiti. Leaving a contingent of soldiers there, Columbus returned to Spain with several kidnapped Taíno. Upon returning with a larger force a year later, Columbus found the fort razed and all settlers dead.

At the next settlement, Columbus chose a defensible cape further east in the present-day DR. At the site, called La Isabela,



the Spaniards erected the Americas' first Christian church and attempted to establish a trading post. However, the colony was unsuccessful, with many Spaniards dying from disease. Further, since the Taíno were uninterested in trading their gold, the Spaniards began

enslaving them, prompting violent resistance. Conflict also erupted among the Europeans, leading to revolt and La Isabela's abandonment.

As more Spanish expeditions brought additional conquerors to the island, some moved south in search of gold. In 1496, they founded Spain's first permanent New World settlement on the southern coast, naming it Santo Domingo (the DR's capital today).

Spanish Colonization

For the next several decades, Santo Domingo flourished as the capital of Spain's New World holdings. By contrast, the Taíno suffered brutal exploitation under the ***encomienda*** system, implemented by the colony's first governor, Nicolás de Ovando. Within this system, indigenous people worked in exchange for

food, housing, and a small salary that was immediately paid to the Spanish Crown as a tax. Many Spaniards abused this system, forcing indigenous inhabitants to toil in slave-like conditions, usually in gold mines or on plantations. Within decades, the Taíno were nearly extinct due to conflict, disease, famine, and their mistreatment in this forced labor system.

With the Taíno population dwindling and the gold mines nearly exhausted, the Spaniards introduced sugarcane cultivation into the region in the early 1500s (see *Economics and Resources*), then began importing enslaved Africans as laborers. The Spaniards also introduced cattle, pigs, and horses to the island, permanently altering its landscape. When Mexico and Peru, which were other New World territories conquered by Spain, proved to be significantly richer in minerals, many Spaniards left the island. For the next 250 years, the colony became a neglected backwater of Spain's empire.

Privateers and Buccaneers: Meanwhile, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France sought to challenge Spain's monopoly in the Caribbean. In 1586, English admiral Sir Francis Drake attacked and occupied Santo Domingo for a month before retreating. In 1655, 2,400 Spanish troops in Santo Domingo repelled a British invasion force of 34 ships and 13,000 men.

Spain's European rivals also sanctioned and funded pirates (called "privateers") to capture Spanish ships and steal their cargo. By the mid-17th century, some French and English pirates (eventually called "buccaneers") had settled on the island of Tortuga, off the northern coast of modern-day Haiti, where they hunted Hispaniola's wild livestock and grew tobacco and cotton.



Hispaniola Divided Between Spain and France

French buccaneers soon expanded their activities to the main island of Hispaniola, founding new settlements and importing

additional enslaved Africans. Preoccupied with war in Europe, Spain was unable to force the removal of the French settlers. Instead, in a 1697 treaty, Spain ceded the western third of the island to France, which it named Saint-Domingue. This territory, which would become Haiti, was soon the world's richest colony, producing half the world's sugar and smaller amounts of coffee, cacao, and cotton by the end of the 18th century. To support these agricultural efforts, Saint-Domingue continued to import large number of enslaved Africans, who comprised 90% of the population by 1790. Spain's Santo Domingo colony experienced some economic growth related to Saint-Domingue's boom, but its population remained small – just one-fifth that of the French colony and only about 50% enslaved Africans.

The Haitian Revolution

To escape their harsh fate, some enslaved people revolted or escaped to the island's mountainous interior. Known as **maroons**, many runaways engaged in guerrilla warfare against the colonial authorities. In 1791, a large-scale rebellion erupted in northern Saint-Domingue. Gradually, the revolt evolved into

the Haitian Revolution, a series of conflicts between 1791-1804 that involved shifting alliances and clashes among enslaved blacks, free blacks, white colonists, and the British, French, and Spanish militaries.



A former slave named Toussaint Louverture soon emerged as a rebel leader. Seeing the rebellion as an opportunity to regain control of the island, Spain promised to free the slaves and allied with Toussaint. However, when the French

government formally abolished slavery in 1794, Toussaint switched his allegiance to France. A 1795 treaty transferred the island's eastern two-thirds (Spain's Santo Domingo colony) to France. Yet when it appeared France's new emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, would reinstate slavery, Toussaint denounced his French allies and declared the island's independence in 1801. In response, the French deployed troops, who captured Toussaint. In 1803, he died in a French prison.

Nevertheless, the French were unable to regain control of the island, and in 1804, rebel leaders proclaimed the founding of the independent republic of Haiti, comprising the entire island. However, while the French withdrew from the West (modern-day Haiti), they maintained troops in the former Santo Domingo colony, and the island subsequently fell into civil war. Taking advantage of the situation, the Spaniards, with British help, expelled the French from Santo Domingo in 1809.

Brief Independence: Under Spanish rule again, Santo Domingo declined through neglect and mismanagement. Inspired by independence movements in Spanish colonies across the New World, the colony's Dominican-born Spanish governor, José Núñez de Cáceres, declared the colony's independence as "Spanish Haiti" in 1821. However, independence proved brief when neighboring Haiti invaded in 1822.

Haitian Occupation

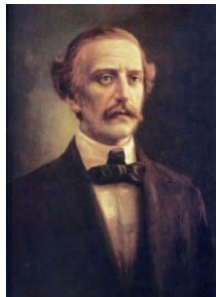
For the next 22 years, the two sides of the island were united under Haitian rule, although in practice, Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer treated the two regions as separate entities. While Boyer did free Santo Domingo's slaves, he instituted discriminatory policies against the inhabitants of the former Spanish colony, reserving positions of governmental and societal power for Haitians and confiscating food and other resources for use by Haitians.

The government also confiscated Roman Catholic Church property and sought to reduce Church power and influence (see *Religion and Spirituality*), while erasing all other European customs and traditions in society. This discriminatory and often cruel treatment inspired some Dominicans to plot the Haitians' overthrow. It also created a deep distrust between the two sides of the island that still echoes today.



War of Independence

In 1838, Dominican nationalist Juan Pablo Duarte founded a resistance movement called **La Trinitaria** ("the Trinity"). While



the Trinity's first attempt to dislodge the Haitians in 1843 was unsuccessful, on February 27, 1844, the date henceforth celebrated as the DR's Independence Day, Duarte's followers overwhelmed Haitian defenses and seized Santo Domingo's Ozama fortress. Within 2 days, all Haitian officials had left the eastern portion of the island, and the rebels declared the independent Dominican Republic. Nevertheless, Haiti refused to accept Dominican independence, and intermittent fighting

between Haiti and the DR continued for over a decade.

Independent but Unstable under *Caudillos*

A national hero, Duarte expected to assume the Presidency, but his ambitions were thwarted by Gen Pedro Santana. In July 1844, Santana stormed Santo Domingo and proclaimed himself the DR's leader. For the next several decades, Santana and various other **caudillos** (military strongmen commanding their own local militias) fought to govern the DR, contributing to political, economic, and social instability.

In November, Santana became the DR's first President. Upon taking office, he drafted a Constitution granting himself significant dictatorial powers, built a powerful Army, staffed government offices with his supporters, and expelled opponents from the country, including Duarte. However, both a deteriorating economy and continuing clashes with Haiti provoked public discontent, and in 1848, Santana was compelled to resign.

Buenaventura Báez was elected President in 1849. While initially allies, Santana and Báez soon began to compete for supremacy, with Báez instituting reforms to reduce Santana's influence. Nevertheless, Santana ran for President in 1853 and won, subsequently expelling Báez from the DR and reestablishing his totalitarian rule.

As Haitian attacks persisted, Dominican leaders began to seek outside help. In 1856, Santana was forced to resign after his attempt to negotiate a treaty with the US provoked widespread opposition. Báez subsequently retook power, expelling Santana and beginning a violent campaign against Santana's supporters.

The 1857 Revolution: During Báez's second term, a currency crisis prompted a farmers' revolt in the northern agricultural region of Cibao. The rebels invited Santana to return to help overthrow Báez, and after a year of violent conflict, Báez fled as Santana restored his dictatorship. During his third term as President, Santana increased military spending, contributing to deteriorating economic conditions.

Return to Spanish Rule

Facing the DR's bankruptcy and fearing another Haitian attack, Santana invited Spain to annex the DR in spring 1861, a move which most Dominicans considered a traitorous betrayal. While Spanish authorities subsequently named Santana governor of Santo Domingo, they effectively stripped him of all power, prompting him to resign. As the Spaniards implemented discriminatory policies against the Dominicans, unrest spread.



The War of Restoration: Violent guerrilla attacks in the mountainous interior, along with other instances of armed resistance to Spanish rule, became known as the War of Restoration. While the Spanish authorities asked Santana to quell the rebellion, his lack of popular support denied him influence over the insurgents. After losing some 10,000 troops to disease and conflict and facing international pressure, Spain annulled the annexation in spring 1865 and withdrew by 1867. Although the conflict cost the DR far fewer casualties, the entire episode left it in political and social disarray.

Independence Restored Amidst Instability

Restored independence did not bring stability and prosperity. Instead, the DR continued to experience civil strife as *caudillos* jostled for power. For example, between 1865-79, the country experienced some 50 military uprisings leading to 21 changes in government. The DR fractured, with feuds and regional rivalries dominating politics.

Power initially alternated between liberal and conservative parties. In 1868, Báez, now a leader of the conservatives, returned to the Presidency. Desperate for economic aid, Báez attempted to secure foreign assistance, notably seeking incorporation into the US in 1869 in a plan that failed ratification in the US Senate by just one vote. Between 1874-76, the country

experienced its first real democratic government before its toppling by coup and Báez's return to the Presidency. After another coup in 1878, Báez fled the country, and a series of interim governments held power for the next few years.



The Lilís Years

This period of political unrest temporarily ended in 1882 with the election of Ulises Heureaux (nicknamed Lilíspi) to the Presidency. While his 7-year rule saw unprecedented stability and economic growth, Lilís was an

authoritarian leader, who created a secret police force, restricted the press, and manipulated elections to remain in power. He borrowed heavily from foreign banks to finance his Army and improve the DR's failing infrastructure, eventually bankrupting the government. A political rival, Ramón Cáceres, assassinated Lilís in 1899, with aid from his cousin, Horacio Vásquez, among others.

Divisions Deepen

Upon Lilís' death, Juan Isidro Jiménez Pereyra, a former Báez supporter and Lilís rival, was elected President and Horacio Vásquez became his Vice President (VP). Their relationship

gradually eroded, and for the next decade, Dominican politics and society were divided between supporters of Juan Isidro Jiménez (*jimenistas*) and those of Horacio Vásquez (*horacistas*). The *jimenistas* and *horacistas* clashed frequently, with power alternating between the two groups.

Meanwhile, the US' posture toward the region was increasingly interventionist. In 1905, the US assumed administration of the DR's mounting domestic and foreign debt. By gaining control of its customs department, the US would ensure repayment of all loans, as it had done previously for neighboring Haiti. By 1907, the US completely controlled the DR's finances, though US President Theodore Roosevelt's plan to establish a protectorate over the DR ultimately failed. The 1911 assassination of President Ramón Cáceres intensified the long-standing rivalry between the *horacistas* and *jimenistas* and launched the bloodiest period in the ongoing civil conflict. In response, the US deployed some 750 Marines to the DR to restore order.

US Occupation

After several failed attempts to stabilize the political process, the US stepped in more directly 5 years later. Reasoning that certain doctrines and policies gave the US the right to intervene in the affairs of its Caribbean and Latin American neighbors, US President Woodrow Wilson announced a formal military occupation in November 1916, having occupied Haiti the year prior. Over the next 8 years, the US military restored order, reorganized the DR's tax and accounting systems, improved education, and built new roads and sanitation systems, though



these improvements primarily helped US-owned sugarcane companies and benefitted few Dominicans. The US also established a powerful national police force to battle various guerrilla groups that staged raids on US targets, notably the *gavilleros* operating in the mountainous interior.

With skyrocketing global sugar prices, the DR experienced economic prosperity during this period, though after US President Warren Harding took office, support for the occupation decreased. In 1924, the US supervised a presidential election, in which former VP Horacio Vásquez won by a landslide. In fall 1924, the US withdrew its military forces, though it still maintained control of the DR's customs department for a period.

Civil Unrest Continues

Vásquez' tenure was initially successful. He continued many of the modernization efforts begun under the US occupation, notably naming US-trained Rafael Trujillo to head the national police. In 1929, Haiti and the DR formally recognized their border for the first time. Nevertheless, Vásquez proved an incompetent and corrupt leader, and when the economy began to falter as the worldwide Great Depression struck in 1929, unrest grew. In early 1930, opposition forces announced a revolution. Instead of confronting the rebels, national police leader Trujillo ordered his forces to allow the revolt against Vásquez to proceed, then seized power himself.

The Trujillo Era

Trujillo took office as President following an election, in which he was the only candidate. Though he only officially served as President from 1930-38 and again from 1942-52, Trujillo controlled the DR from 1930-61.



Ruling with an iron fist and nicknamed **El Jefe** ("the Boss"), Trujillo outlawed all political parties but his own, strengthened the military, enforced strict censorship laws, created a secret police force to suppress dissent by imprisoning and torturing or murdering opponents, and appointed his relatives to important political positions. Further, to increase his personal wealth, he created business monopolies controlled by

his extended family that, by the end of his rule, comprised 80% of the DR's industrial output. Trujillo also dominated the Catholic

Church and influenced virtually all elements of society, even renaming Santo Domingo as Ciudad Trujillo ("Trujillo City"). Many Dominicans welcomed his efforts to increase public works projects, improve the education system, and eliminate foreign debt. The DR's political and economic stability during the Trujillo years attracted foreign investment, with most funders downplaying his regime's abuses.

Operación Perejil: Despite being of Spanish, Creole, and Haitian descent, Trujillo held racist, anti-Haitian views. Vowing to "dominicanize" the country, Trujillo ordered the military to execute Haitians in 1937, especially targeting those in a disputed border region. To separate Dominicans from Haitians, soldiers asked anyone they encountered to pronounce the Spanish word **perejil** ("parsley"). A person unable to do so correctly was assumed to be a Haitian and executed. In all, up to 33,000 Haitians were murdered, their remains either left as a warning to others, dumped in the ocean, or thrown into the Dajabón River. Under international pressure, Trujillo paid \$525,000 of a promised \$750,000 to the Haitian government for damages and injuries in 1938.



Opposition to Trujillo's rule increased during the later years of his dictatorship, especially as his human rights abuses mounted, such as the 1960 murder of the Mirabal sisters (see *Sex and Gender*). The US supported Trujillo for many years due to his anti-communist stance but reversed course in 1960, when he ordered the assassination of the Venezuelan President (the operation failed). As international pressure increased, Trujillo forced the President to resign in 1960 (Trujillo's brother, Héctor, had been President since 1952) and replaced him with his VP, Joaquín Balaguer. In May 1961, a group of CIA-armed dissidents assassinated Trujillo.

Chaos in the Post-Trujillo DR

The next several months were chaotic, with the Trujillo family violently suppressing political opponents, before they were

expelled from the country. Viewed as Trujillo's puppet, President Balaguer was unpopular and also forced into exile in early 1962. A US-supported Council of State then assumed executive power.

A Democratic Hope Suppressed: In the DR's first free presidential elections in decades, scholar-poet Juan Bosch won a landslide victory in late 1962. Head of the ***Partido Revolucionario Dominicano*** (Dominican Revolutionary Party or PRD), which he had founded from exile in 1939, Bosch took office in early 1963 and immediately introduced political and social reforms. However, his new Constitution attracted opposition from the DR's landowners, industrialists, Catholic Church, and military. After just 7 months in office, a US-backed military coup deposed Bosch, the DR's first directly elected democratic President, and replaced him with a military council.



The US Intervenes Again: In spring 1965, popular frustration developed into open revolt organized by Bosch's PRD. Fearful that the movement would install a communist government, the US deployed 42,000 troops to the DR, ending the revolt but prompting significant international outcry. The US installed a military council to organize elections for 1966.

The "Twelve Years" of Balaguer

Both former Presidents Balaguer and Bosch returned from exile to participate in the 1966 presidential elections, but Bosch declined to campaign publicly in fear of his safety. Presenting himself as a moderate conservative and gaining the support of both the US and the DR political establishment, Balaguer emerged victorious amidst accusations of vote rigging.

Balaguer remained in office for the next 12 years, repressing any dissent through bribes and intimidation. While he introduced social reforms and oversaw a stable economy, he also reverted to many Trujillo-era policies, consolidating his personal power,

strengthening the military, and censoring the media. Further, he created a secret police force called **La Banda** to harass and murder political opponents.



The PRD Takes Control

US support for Balaguer reversed under President Carter, and despite strong economic growth, Balaguer lost the 1978 presidential election to PRD candidate Antonio Guzmán. Balaguer initially refused to accept the results, deploying troops to burn ballot boxes and cutting electricity throughout the country before declaring himself the victor.

Following US and international pressure, Balaguer eventually conceded defeat and Guzmán took office. Guzmán presented himself as an advocate for human rights, fair elections, and a demilitarized government but quickly lost support after he began placing relatives and friends in government posts. The public further questioned his leadership ability after the government's poor response to a devastating 1979 hurricane and deteriorating economic conditions.

The 1982 presidential election brought Balaguer's return as a candidate, but he lost to PRD candidate Salvador Jorge Blanco. Blanco inherited a depressed economy and was compelled to accept international aid, while imposing strict austerity measures. The reforms prompted riots in 1984, resulting in violent response from authorities, who killed dozens of protestors. While the measures eventually stimulated the economy and strengthened the DR's currency, the episode created a loss of confidence in the PRD.

Balaguer Returns

In 1986, voters narrowly returned Balaguer to the Presidency, who, at age 80, worked tirelessly to discredit Blanco to ensure that he would never seek reelection, even arresting and imprisoning him. Balaguer also reversed Blanco's austerity measures, leading to the worst economic crisis of the century.

Because Balaguer refused to pay the DR's foreign debt, its credit was cut, leading to severe shortages in essential goods.

In the 1990 election, Balaguer claimed a narrow victory in a tight three-way race with PRD candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez and former President Bosch, now representing the ***Partido de la Liberación Dominicana*** (PLD or Dominican Liberation Party, a party he had founded in 1973). Nevertheless, opposition to Balaguer grew amidst accusations of election fraud and ongoing economic hardships.

The same candidates ran in the 1994 presidential race. As before, Balaguer smeared his opponents (Bosch as a communist and Peña Gómez for his Haitian ancestry) but claimed a narrow victory over Gómez amid significant voting irregularities. The obviously fraudulent result sparked public demonstrations. Under pressure from the US and the DR's political establishment, Balaguer was forced to accept a plan called the Dominican Pact for Democracy that shortened his term to 2 years and set new elections for 1996, while forbidding him to enter the race.

Contemporary Dominican Republic

PRD candidate Peña Gómez won the first round of the 1996 presidential election with some 46% of the vote, but because he did not receive a majority, a run-off was required. Before the second round of voting, former President Balaguer flooded the airwaves with racist (anti-Haitian) ads against Peña Gómez, while former President Bosch campaigned for his protégé, PLD candidate Leonel Fernández. As a result, support for Peña Gómez declined, and Fernández won the run-off.



In office, Fernández sought to reduce government corruption, improve the economy, and strengthen foreign relations. During his term, the economy grew as unemployment decreased, though a 1998 hurricane caused

significant damage and loss of life (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Fernández was ineligible to seek reelection in 2000. Former President Balaguer ran for the office a final time (he was almost 94) but received just 25% of the vote in the first round. However, he remained influential, convincing PLD candidate Danilo Medina to withdraw from the second round and handing the victory to PRD candidate Hipólito Mejía. Mejía's term saw a banking crisis (see *Economics and Resources*), growing government debt, and chronic power shortages amidst accusations of corruption and mismanagement. His administration also increased the government's illegal expulsion of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent.

Mejía lost to former President Fernández in 2004, who also won reelection in 2008. In January 2010, an earthquake devastated Haiti, prompting hundreds of thousands of Haitians to flee to the DR. The following month, the DR approved a new Constitution which, among other changes, prohibited the President from serving two consecutive terms, banned abortion (see *Sex and Gender*), and excluded children of illegal immigrants from DR citizenship (see *Political and Social Relations*).

The PLD maintained its hold on power with the 2012 victory of its candidate Danilo Medina and, following a constitutional amendment allowing him a consecutive term, his 2016 reelection.



President Medina instituted popular labor reforms and anti-corruption measures, while also leading the DR to impressive

economic growth. In 2013, a Dominican court revoked the citizenship of thousands of Dominican-born residents of Haitian descent. In response to international outcry, the government modified the ruling by allowing Dominican-born non-citizens to register for temporary residence or apply to be naturalized. Nevertheless, unregistered individuals were subject to

deportation, and between 2015-17, the DR deported some 60,000 people to Haiti, including 4,000 unaccompanied children.

Today, the DR continues to face social inequalities, high crime rates, drug-trafficking, tense relations with Haiti, and corruption permeates society. Investigations in 2016 revealed a decade-long scheme in which politicians, public officials, state-owned company executives accepted some \$92 million in bribes from the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht in exchange for public works contracts. In the July 2020 presidential election, frustration with ongoing corruption, economic woes, and the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic compelled voters to reject the PLD in favor of opposition candidate Luis Abinader (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Dominican Myths

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Many Dominican myths originated in Taíno, European, and African cultures. Some stories exhibit both indigenous and Christian traditions and beliefs, while others provide examples of good and moral behavior.

Ciguapas: Dominican folklore tells of *ciguapas*, female, human-like creatures that are often compared to mermaids. With long, glossy, dark hair, brown or blue skin, and piercing dark eyes, the *ciguapas* have backwards feet, meant to confuse any who attempt to follow their footsteps. Communicating through chirp-like noises, the *ciguapas* inhabit the forests deep in the Dominican mountains, emerging only at night to search for food. While they typically collect fruits and vegetables or hunt small animals, the *ciguapas* occasionally target men wandering the forest. Luring the men with their beauty, the *ciguapas* capture and devour them. In some versions, the *ciguapas* are the spirits of Taíno women.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

The Dominican Republic

La República

Dominicana (Spanish)

Political Borders

Haiti: 234 mi

Coastline: 800 mi

Capital

Santo Domingo

Demographics

The Dominican Republic's (DR's) population of about 10.8 million is growing at an annual rate of 0.76%. About 84% of the population lives in urban areas, with about one-third of Dominicans residing in the capital city of Santo Domingo. Population density is highest along the coasts, particularly in the South, with smaller clusters in the valleys of the mountainous interior.



Flag

The DR's flag consists of a centered white cross that divides it into four equal rectangles, two each red and blue. In the center, the DR's coat of arms features a shield supported by laurel (left) and palm (right) branches. On the shield, an open Bible displays the words **Y la verdad los hará libre** ("And the truth will set them free"). A blue ribbon above the shield reads **Dios, Patria, Libertad** ("God, Fatherland, Liberty"), while a red ribbon below the shield reads



República Dominicana ("Dominican Republic"). The flag's blue color stands for liberty, the red represents the blood of national heroes, and the white denotes salvation.

Geography

The DR is an island nation situated in the Greater Antilles, a North American grouping of islands bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea, and Gulf of America. The DR shares the island of Hispaniola – the Antilles' second largest island after Cuba – with Haiti, which occupies the island's western third. The North Atlantic Ocean lies to the north and the Caribbean Sea borders the DR to the south. To the east, the DR is separated from Puerto Rico by the Mona Passage, a strait that connects the Atlantic to the Caribbean and is a strategic shipping route. The DR's total land area is about 18,656 sq mi, making it slightly larger than twice the size of New Jersey and the Antilles' second largest nation after Cuba.

Geographically diverse, the DR features rugged mountains interspersed with highlands, fertile valleys, and low-lying coastal plains. The nation's (and the region's) highest point, Pico Duarte, rises to 10,164 ft in the ***Cordillera Central***, a mountain range that runs from Santo Domingo into Haiti and in its entirety occupies one-third of Hispaniola's landmass. Other ranges include the ***Cordillera Oriental*** in the East and ***Cordillera Septentrional*** in the North.

The DR is also home to the region's lowest elevation and largest lake, ***Lago Enriquillo***, which lies 131 ft below sea level. Rich in biodiversity, the DR is home to over 5,600 plant and 500 vertebrate species and 20 distinct vegetation zones. These range from pine and subtropical palm forests that blanket mountain slopes and valleys, dry

semi-deserts studded with thorn bushes, cacti, and agave plants in Southwest, to mangrove swamps and sandy beaches that extend along the coasts.

Climate

The DR experiences a hot and humid tropical climate characterized by little seasonal variation in temperature. A dry season runs December-April and a rainy season from late May-November. Temperatures on the coasts average 77°F to 93°F



year-round but tend to be a few degrees cooler on the Atlantic north and northeast coasts. Higher elevations experience temperatures ranging from 66°F to 84°F.

Natural Hazards

The DR is vulnerable to flooding, periods of extreme heat, drought, tropical storms, and hurricanes. Flooding tends to occur after heavy seasonal rains, inundating low-lying regions like inland valleys and coastal areas, particularly in the North. Meanwhile, occasional droughts lead to food and water shortages. The DR's location within the Caribbean's hurricane belt makes it prone to devastating hurricanes, which strike from June-November and can result in infrastructure damage, loss of life, and millions in economic losses. Hurricanes and tropical storms also leave thousands of Dominicans displaced and without access to food, clean water, and basic services.

In 1998, Hurricane George killed 350 people and displaced some 85,000, while tropical storm Noel (2007) displaced some 66,000 and left some 100 communities isolated for weeks due to damaged roads and bridges. Weak regulations and lax enforcement of building codes render many poorly constructed urban structures particularly vulnerable.

Environmental Issues

Rapid urbanization since the 1960s, a growing population, and a burgeoning tourist industry have placed significant strain on the DR's natural environment.

Despite protective measures, notably the allocation of large swaths of land as national parks and conservation areas, deforestation remains the DR's most pressing environmental concern. Parks tend to be underfunded and mismanaged, allowing illegal logging and agricultural encroachment that promote deforestation. According to some estimates, the DR has lost about 60% of its forests in the last 80 years.



Along the coasts, overfishing, poor solid waste management, agricultural runoff, and other pollution degrade marine ecosystems such as fragile coral reefs. Destructive activities are particularly widespread in densely populated and tourist areas. According to experts, Santo Domingo is one of five cities worldwide that will be most affected by rising sea levels associated with climate change.

Government

The DR is a presidential republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 31 provinces and a ***Distrito Nacional*** (National District, the capital city of Santo Domingo). Each province is led by a governor appointed by the President and divides into ***municipios*** (municipalities) led by



city councils and mayors. The DR's latest Constitution was adopted in 2015 and separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches while outlining the basic rights and freedoms of the Dominican people.

Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who is both chief-of-state and head-of-government. A council of ministers and Vice President (VP) support the President. The President and VP are elected by popular vote to serve up to two consecutive 4-year terms. President Danilo Medina, and VP Margarita Cedeño de Fernández took office in 2012 and were reelected in 2016. Postponed by 2 months due to the coronavirus pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*), the July 2020 election saw the victory of Luis Abinader, who, with VP Raquel Peña, took office in August 2020. Abinader was reelected in May 2024.

Legislative Branch

The DR's legislature is a two-chamber ***Congreso Nacional*** (National Congress or NC) composed of a 32-seat ***Senado*** (Senate) and 190-seat ***Cámara de Diputados*** (Chamber of Deputies), each serving 4-year terms. Of the 32 Senators, 26 are directly elected in single-seat constituencies and 6 are indirectly elected by province-wide plurality votes for its

candidates to the Chamber of Deputies. Of the 190 Deputies, 178 are directly elected in single-seat constituencies, 5 in a nationwide constituency, and 7 diaspora members by simple majority. The NC controls most legislative powers, including amending the Constitution, appointing positions in government, and approving declarations of war.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court, Constitutional Court, Appellate Courts, Courts of First Instance, Courts of Peace, a system of special courts that oversee juvenile, labor, and land cases, and a Contentious Administrative Court for cases filed against the government. As the highest court, the Supreme Court is the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases. The Supreme Court's 16 magistrates and the Constitutional Court's 13 judges are appointed by the National Council of the Judiciary, an independent body comprised of the President, leaders of both chambers of the NC, the President of the Supreme Court, and a NC representative who is not a member of the ruling party.

Supreme Court members serve 7-year terms, while the Constitutional Court's judges serve 9-year terms. Some members of the judiciary have been vulnerable to bribery from prominent politicians and the DR's economic elite, making judicial power weak and fragmented.

Political Climate

After enduring decades of economic distress and political upheaval, the political environment has stabilized since the mid-1990s. Generally free and fair



elections have brought governments to power that have sought to strengthen rule of law and governance structures, foster civil society, grow the economy, and reduce the nation's high poverty and income inequality levels. Still, widespread corruption and a weak judiciary undermine democratic progress. In 2015, for example, sympathetic judges dismissed charges of money laundering, illicit activities and gross abuse of power against a

high-ranking public official. In 2016, investigations revealed that several other public officials had accepted millions in bribes from a Brazilian construction company over the course of a decade (see *History and Myth*).

The most prominent political party in recent years, the **Partido de la Liberación Dominicana** (PLD or Dominican Liberation Party) was historically center-left but since the 1990s, has shifted toward a rightist ideology. It dominated the political arena in recent decades, notably holding the Presidency from 1996-2000 and 2004-20 (see *History and Myth*). Other prominent political parties include the leftist **Partido Revolucionario Dominicano** (PRD or Dominican Revolutionary Party – see *History and Myth*), though it has shifted to the center in recent years, the center-left **Partido Revolucionario Moderno** (PRM or Modern Revolutionary Party – founded by ex-PRD members in 2014), and the center-right **Partido Reformista Social Cristiano** (PRSC or Social Christian Reformist Party), the party of former President Balaguer (see *History and Myth*).



In late 2019, former President Fernández (see *History and Myth*) left the PLD to form the **Fuerza del Pueblo** (FP or People's Force) after claiming that the PLD's candidate selection process, in which

Fernández narrowly lost to President Medina's chosen successor, Gonzalo Castillo, was fraudulent. The departure of Fernández and other prominent PLD members further weakening the PLD.

In the July 2020 elections, PRM candidate Luis Abinader defeated PLD candidate Castillo, FP candidate former President Fernández, and three other candidates in the first round of voting, ending the PLD's decades-long hold on power. Observers believe Abinader benefitted from public discontent over the government's handling of the coronavirus (see *Sustenance and Health*), the state of the economy, and corruption. A US-educated economist and operator of major tourism projects, Abinader has pledged to return the country to

economic growth. In May 2024, Abinader was reelected for his second term as president.

Defense

The Dominican Armed Forces (DAF) are a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air branches, with a joint strength of 56,800 active duty troops and 15,000 reserve personnel. The DAF are the Caribbean region's largest and Latin America's ninth largest force. Despite its size, the DAF's equipment inventory is small, obsolete, and difficult to maintain. The DAF are charged with maintaining internal security and defending against foreign threats primarily along the border with Haiti (see "Security Issues" below). Other tasks include disaster relief efforts and counter-narcotics operations, which the DAF perform in collaboration with the police through a specialized, inter-agency task force.

Army: The Dominican Army is a well-trained force of 29,500 active-duty troops organized into five regional "Defense Zones" consisting of three Special Forces battalions, 13 maneuver brigades, regiments, and battalions (including light, air maneuver, and other) and one combat support brigade.



Navy: Headquartered in the capital city of Santo Domingo, the Dominican Navy is a well-trained force of 11,200 active-duty troops comprised of a Special Forces unit (SEAL) and an amphibious maneuver unit equipped with 17 patrol and coastal combatants, an amphibious vessel, and one logistics and support craft.

Air Force: The Dominican Air Force is a well-trained force of 16,100 active-duty troops organized into a ground attack, a search and rescue, a transport, a training, and an air defense squadron equipped with 34 intelligence gathering, transport, and training aircraft, 33 helicopters, and air defense equipment.

Paramilitary: The Dominican Paramilitary consists of 15,000 National Police members.

Domican Republic Air Force Rank Insignia



Lieutenant
General



Major
General



Brigadier
Colonel



Colonel



Lieutenant
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant
First
Class



Lieutenant
Second
Class



Cadet



Sergeant
Major



Master
Sergeant



Staff
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Private
First
Class

Foreign Relations

The DR seeks to cultivate close economic, social, and political ties with its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors. In the interest of economic and political stability, the DR also maintains friendly relations with the US and other Western and European nations. In 2018, the DR notably cut its diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of China. Since then, the DR has sought to attract Chinese investment in large-scale infrastructure projects and otherwise cultivate economic ties with China. The DR also participates in large, global organizations like the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization.



Regional Cooperation: As one of the region's more prosperous nations, the DR has an increasingly influential role in promoting regional stability. The DR actively participates in regional institutions like the Organization of American States, Inter-American Development Bank, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) that promote the economic, social, and political integration of member states. CARICOM, for example, is a regional organization of 15 Latin American and Caribbean states that seeks to improve member nations' standards of living, security, and foreign policy coordination, often focusing on the needs of its less developed members.

Relations with the US: The US and DR first established diplomatic relations in 1844 following the DR's independence from Haiti (see *History and Myth*). In subsequent decades, the US' diplomatic and military interventions in the DR's internal affairs led to the formation of strong political, economic, military, and cultural ties. In 2022, US bilateral aid to the DR totaled some \$43.5 million, with numerous initiatives seeking to improve the effectiveness of the DR's democratic institutions by reducing institutional corruption and improving government transparency.

Other programs aim to improve the quality of DR's healthcare and education, promote economic growth, foster civil society, and reduce energy sector inefficiencies.

The DR's location at the heart of the Caribbean, proximity to the US, growing economy, and political stability make it a key regional ally. The US and DR cooperate on regional security issues through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), a program that promotes rule of law, citizen safety, and the efficacy of law enforcement. Under CBSI, the US partners with the DR to hinder illicit narcotics smuggling, human trafficking, illegal migration, and the spread of organized crime. In this capacity, the US provides the DR with law-enforcement training

and equipment, financial assistance, and military training and equipment.

The US and DR maintain close trade ties through the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free



Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), an agreement to ease the flow of goods, services, and investment among the US, DR, and five Central American nations (see *Economics and Resources*). Still, some trade and labor disputes persist, prompted in part by the DR's weak intellectual property protection and enforcement laws and high levels of corruption. The US is home to roughly 2.4 million Dominicans – the largest Dominican community outside of the DR – who send billions of dollars in remittances to the DR annually (see *Economics and Resources*).

Security Issues

Tensions with Haiti: The DR's tumultuous, violent history with Haiti (see *History and Myth*) dominates bilateral relations and contributes to significant tension between the two nations. In recent years, political and economic volatility in Haiti prompted a large number of Haitians to attempt to cross into the DR in search of employment opportunities. Bouts of violence between Dominican authorities and Haitian migrants increased, leaving

dozens of Haitians dead and hundreds injured over the last several years. While most incidents occur in border regions, violence against Haitians also flares in poor neighborhoods across the country. Dominican offenders claim they are attempting to evict illegal Haitians or protect their communities from disease and crime, which they associate with Haitians (see “Social Relations” below). Meanwhile, the DR has increased its military presence along the border, and authorities continue to face public pressure to deport undocumented residents, limit their access to healthcare and education, and generally curtail immigration from Haiti.

Another significant source of tension between the neighbors is the DR government's treatment of Dominicans of Haitian descent living in the DR, particularly its long-standing practice of illegally deporting them to Haiti. A 2010 constitutional change and subsequent 2013 Constitutional Court ruling revised Dominican citizenship laws to strip hundreds of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry of their DR citizenship. The move rendered thousands of Dominicans stateless and prompted

international outcry. Though authorities introduced a process in 2015 to allow affected Dominicans to reapply for residency – and later claimed some 364,695



people had “regularized” their status – activists contend little progress has been made in clarifying the situation.

According to experts, as of 2019, just 31% of Dominicans who lost their citizenship have been able to attain the proper documentation required to access healthcare services, education, formal employment, and insurance. Both the UN and human rights activists claim these controversial laws unfairly target and marginalize Dominicans of Haitian descent and object to their arbitrary deportation (see *History and Myth*).

Crime and Narcotics Smuggling: According to US government estimates, some 90% of South American cocaine that transits the Caribbean to US and Europe passes through the DR via illicit flights and marine vessels. Corruption at all levels of government and in the private sector has contributed to the growth of the



narcotics industry in the DR. The DAF's insufficient maritime and aerial patrol and surveillance capabilities hamper the DR's ability to adequately counter the rise in crime and narcotics smuggling. As a result, the DR

cooperates closely with the US in anti-drug seizures, extraditions, and joint operations.

Venezuelan Immigrants: Political instability in Venezuela has prompted Venezuelans to seek asylum in the DR. In response, Dominican authorities implemented stricter guidelines that limit entry into the DR and make the process of gaining asylum more difficult, prompting some international concern and regional tension. Observers also note that refugees already residing in the DR have limited access to basic services and are vulnerable to labor exploitation and trafficking. As of mid-2024, some 139,800 Venezuelans reside in the DR.

Ethnic Groups

The DR's population divides into three groups: people of mixed European, African, and indigenous ancestry; whites (Dominicans of Spanish or other European descent); and blacks (Dominicans of African and/or Haitian descent). As the largest group, Dominicans of mixed descent make up some 74% of the population and most of the lower and middle classes.

Dominicans use several different labels to classify people according to skin color, hair type, and facial features. Further, they use several terms to describe people of mixed descent, notably *mestizo*, *mulatto*, and *indio*. Historically, the term *mestizo* implied a mix of indigenous and European ancestry, while *mulatto* described people of mixed African and European

descent. While the two terms were used interchangeably during some historical periods, the term *mulatto* generally carried more social stigma. Today, many Dominicans of mixed descent remain reluctant to identify as *mulatto*. Unlike elsewhere in the region, the term *indio* does not necessarily reflect an indigenous ancestry due to the nearly complete decimation of the DR's indigenous population following the Spanish conquest (see *History and Myth*). Instead, the term is also a label for a person of mixed ancestry.

The DR's white minority, comprising around 18% of the population, are predominantly members of the upper class. The elite hold considerable status, power, and prestige that correlates with their ancestry, with the most prestigious families tracing their roots to historically prominent Spanish landowners, merchants, and politicians. Other white families descend from European immigrants, who arrived later, including artists and intellectuals who fled Spain's repressive regime in the 1940s.

Meanwhile, the 8% of Dominicans who identify as black include descendants of enslaved Africans brought to Hispaniola during the colonial period (see *History and Myth*). Disproportionately comprising the very poor, black Dominicans typically work as urban wage laborers, subsistence farmers, and in other low-income, low-status jobs.

Finally, the population includes the descendants of 19th- and 20th-century immigrants from the US, Italy, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Palestine. The DR is also home to some non-Hispanic immigrants with African ancestry from English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean islands, who are sometimes collectively referred to in a derogatory manner as **cocolos**.

Social Relations

Dominican society divides along class lines that emerged during the colonial era (see *History and Myth*), when a small and



wealthy elite comprised primarily of landowners maintained power over a large population of poor residents. Dominican society today continues to reflect a stratified structure with little social mobility. The elite class divides into two tiers: the **tutumpotes** (“the all-powerful”) or **gente de primera** (“first-class people”), comprising wealthy business owners, high-ranking politicians, and some landowners, and the **gente de segunda** (“second-class people”) including successful immigrants, Dominicans, who married into the *gente de primera*, and, increasingly, professional baseball players (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

A growing middle class, fueled in part by substantial remittances sent from their relatives living abroad (see *Economics and Resources*), consists mostly of private- and public-sector workers whose livelihoods depend heavily on the state of the DR’s economy. While the conditions of the lower classes, especially the very poor, have begun to improve in recent years, the DR remains burdened by unequal wealth distribution and persistent poverty (see *Economics and Resources*).



Some Dominicans view people with darker skin as inferior. The DR’s black residents have endured a long history of persecution and stigmatization, particularly under the Trujillo regime’s repressive racism (see *History and Myth*). Recent waves of immigration have heightened racial tensions, particularly after large numbers of Haitians entered the DR following the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti (see *History and Myth*).

Although the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on race, Dominicans with African and/or Haitian ancestry experience systemic discrimination and notable violence, poverty, and unemployment. Other marginalized groups include poor, women, people with disabilities, and homosexual community members (see *Sex and Gender*), all of whom experience limited access to health, justice, and social services.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

The population of the Dominican Republic (DR) is primarily Christian. As of 2024, about 50% of Dominicans are Evangelical Protestant, 30% Roman Catholic, and about 19% claim no religious affiliation. Other traditions with small followings include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, non-evangelical Protestant groups, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Baha'ism.



The DR's Constitution prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of religion, allowing Dominicans to worship and express all faiths and beliefs freely so long as practitioners respect public order and social norms. A 1954 accord with the Holy See (the governing body of the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican in Rome) designates Roman Catholicism as the DR's official religion, thereby granting the Catholic Church privileges not afforded other religious groups. For example, the Catholic Church receives additional government funding and is exempt from the registration process that all other religious groups must complete in order to receive tax exemptions, perform religious ceremonies, build places of worship, and establish schools.

Early Spiritual Landscape

The DR's indigenous Taíno inhabitants (see *History and Myth*) led rich spiritual lives. Scholars believe the Taíno recognized numerous **cemi** (spirits), who both controlled the natural elements like the rain, sun, and moon and inhabited animate and inanimate objects such as trees, mountains, and animals. To communicate with and worship **cemi**, the Taíno practiced various rituals led by a **behique** (shaman) or **cacique** (community leader – see *History and Myth*). If left unappeased,

cemi could bring misfortune and illness. A *behique* also communicated with the spirits of deceased ancestors (*opía* or *hupia*) to transmit messages between the living and the dead.

Introduction of Christianity

Soon after the arrival of Spanish conquerors in 1492 (see *History and Myth*), a decree from the Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church in Rome, directed the Spaniards to convert the indigenous population to Roman Catholicism. Accompanying Columbus on his second voyage to the region (see *History and Myth*), Franciscan friar Bernando Boyl conducted the Americas'

first mass at the Spanish settlement of La Isabela in early 1494 (see *History and Myth*). Following the 1496 founding of Santo Domingo (see *History and Myth*), the Church used it as a regional base, sending waves of Franciscan and Dominican missionaries



to other Caribbean islands and the mainland to proselytize among indigenous populations. In Santo Domingo, the Spaniards built the New World's first cathedral, ***La Catedral de Santa María la Menor*** (Cathedral of St. Mary of the Incarnation), completed in 1541.

Religion during the Colonial Period

Viewing indigenous beliefs and practices as manifestations of the devil, the Spanish conquerors destroyed sacred sites and prohibited religious rituals. They also forcefully and violently subjugated the Taíno, enslaving thousands to toil in gold mines and plantations (see *History and Myth*). These oppressive policies shocked many Catholic missionaries, prompting some to advocate for better treatment of indigenous populations. One notable example was conquistador-turned-Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas, who denounced the colonists' treatment of the Taíno. Despite de las Casas' petitions, repressive colonial policies and disease eventually led to the near annihilation of Taíno culture and religion.

In subsequent decades, the Catholic Church became central to education, politics, and the economy. The Church opened schools, orphanages, and hospitals that provided social services. Likewise, Catholic missionary orders like the Dominicans and Franciscans opened convents housing hundreds of clergy members, who provided religious instruction and services for the masses. The Dominican order also established the DR's first institution of higher learning, the

Universidad Pontificia de Santo Tomás de Aquino

("Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas," the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo today – see *Learning and Knowledge*).



Eventually the Spanish Crown began investing its resources into more lucrative colonies, allowing Santo Domingo to sink into relative obscurity (see *History and Myth*). Nevertheless, the Catholic Church maintained its power and influence among the colony's remaining Spanish elite, becoming firmly entrenched in the ruling class.

Religion in the 19th Century

The 1822 Haitian occupation (see *History and Myth*) brought a significant shift in the religious landscape. Viewing the Catholic Church as a symbol of colonialism, slavery, and repression, the Haitians stripped it of all material assets, confiscating and selling Church property and severing its political linkages. Even after the DR's 1844 independence (see *History and Myth*), the Church failed to regain its former prominence, struggling in subsequent decades to rebuild its influence in social, economic, and political spheres. Years of internal conflict made it particularly difficult for the Church to gain political influence: while some administrations granted concessions and privileges to the Church, others sought to curb its power and limit its relations with the state. As a result, Church influence in marriage, divorce, and education fluctuated over the decades.

Religion in the 20th Century

The Catholic Church's influence grew again in the mid-20th century after Rafael Trujillo took power (see *History and Myth*). A dictatorial ruler, Trujillo used the Church as an instrument to consolidate his regime's control over Dominican society. Designated as one of the regime's three main sources of power (along with the oligarchy and the armed forces), the Church remained supportive of Trujillo despite the oppressive nature of his regime (see *History and Myth*). For example, the Vatican sent a large contingent of Spanish priests to the DR in the 1950s upon Trujillo's request.

Over the years, continuing violence and deteriorating social conditions compelled many Catholic priests and nuns to vocally protest Trujillo's repression of the Dominican people. Tensions escalated in 1960, when prominent Catholic clergy publicly



criticized the mass arrest and torture of Trujillo's political opponents in a widely circulated pastoral letter. Angered by the perceived betrayal, Trujillo retaliated with a campaign of harassment against the Church and even planned to imprison prominent clergy members, an act avoided by his 1961 assassination (see *History and Myth*).

Religion Today

In recent decades, the DR's landscape has continued to change. According to studies, the proportion of Dominicans identifying as Catholic reduced from 57% in 2005 to 30% today, while the proportion of evangelical Protestants increased from 13% in 2015 to 50% today. Catholicism tends to be associated with middle and upper classes and is prevalent in urban areas. By contrast, Protestantism tends to be commoner among the poor and lower classes and is rising in popularity in rural regions.

The Catholic Church's privileged status in society and the preferential treatment it receives from the government causes some friction with other religious groups. Still, such tensions are generally low and most non-Catholic groups feel they are able to practice their faiths freely. The DR government regularly hosts interfaith dialogues to promote religious tolerance.

Catholicism: While the Catholic Church remains largely removed from the political sphere, prominent Catholic leaders continue to speak out against government corruption and the plight of the poor and marginalized. Further, Catholicism remains central to daily life for many Dominicans. Catholic religious instruction is required in all public schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*), and Catholic rituals feature at many major life events and celebrations (see *Family and Kinship*).

Most cities and towns have Catholic churches, often centered in the main square, and many also have their own patron saints (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Priests tend to form close bonds with their parishioners, especially in rural areas, where they act as important and trusted social figures. Moreover, Catholic institutions actively engage with their communities by providing important civil services and managing hospitals, orphanages, convalescent homes, and schools.

Protestantism: Protestantism arrived from North America in the 1820s, though it experienced limited growth until the 1960s,

when evangelical Protestants from the US widely proselytized in rural areas. While Pentecostals make up the fastest growing evangelical group, other prominent groups include the Seventh-Day Adventists, Dominican Evangelical Church, and Assemblies



of God. Like the Catholic Church, Protestant churches tend to be active in their communities, focusing on improving the conditions of the poor and other vulnerable populations.

Dominican Vùdú: Some residents follow Dominican Vùdú (Voodoo), a religion that originated in West Africa among the Fon and Yoruba ethnic groups. Brought to Hispaniola by enslaved Africans (see *History and Myth*), the tradition has evolved over the years and today has regional variations. In Haiti, the faith is known as **Vodun** or **Vodoun**. As an animist religion, Voodoo teaches that the spirit of life or consciousness resides in all objects. Followers recognize a pantheon of supreme beings and divinities, who control the natural world. Followers also believe that ancestral spirits can interfere in daily life and as a result seek to maintain good relations with the spirit world by consulting trained diviners.

In Dominican Vùdú, supernatural beings and spirits (*luas*) influence daily life and are petitioned by religious specialists (called **gente que trabajan** or “people who work” with the spirits) for certain services. For example, women experiencing reproductive problems may seek the help of the goddess of love, **Anaisa**, while the **Barón del Cementerio** (“Baron of the Cemetery”) serves as a mediator for the dead, purging the sins of the deceased and easing their transition to the afterlife. Some Dominican festivals feature dancing, chanting, drumming, and rituals that reflect Vùdú traditions (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Some Catholic Dominicans mix these beliefs into their religious practices, resulting in a syncretic (blended) form of Catholicism. For example, a follower might petition both Catholic saints and Voodoo deities for spiritual guidance. He might attend Catholic mass but also consult a diviner or spiritualist to dispel misfortune or heal illness. While some followers incorporate Voodoo beliefs and traditions into Christian practices or practice them in parallel, a few adhere only to these practices.



Other Religious Groups: The DR is home to less than 10,000 Muslims and Jews.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the center of Dominican life and provides emotional, economic, and social support. Although economic hardships have caused significant emigration and familial stress, Dominicans continue to prioritize their families, sharing good fortune with their relations and involving them in important life decisions and milestones.

Residence

The Dominican Republic (DR) experienced internal migration and urbanization through the first decades of the 21st century, especially in and around Santo Domingo and the northern city of Santiago. By 2024, some 84% of the population lived in urban areas. Access to electricity is near universal, though frequent hours-long outages are common. Additionally, while most urban Dominicans have running water and indoor plumbing, access to water is often unreliable in poorer city neighborhoods and rural regions. In such areas, Dominicans must rely on communal wells or barrels to collect rainwater.

Urban: Housing conditions in urban areas vary by income. Upper-class Dominicans tend to live in luxurious apartment buildings or single-family



dwellings with pools and tennis courts. By contrast, middle income Dominicans generally occupy modest homes with living areas often divided by wooden boards or sheets for use by several relatives. The poorest urban dwellers typically lack adequate shelter, living in makeshift homes constructed of scrap wood or salvaged cinderblocks without proper sewage or waste disposal. Dominicans in substandard housing are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters such as hurricanes (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Rural: In rural areas, wealthy Dominicans often live in pastel-colored, Victorian-style homes featuring detailed woodwork and a shaded **galeria** (porch), where family members relax and entertain. Most middle-income rural dwellers occupy brightly painted brick or concrete homes with tile or corrugated metal roofs.



The homes of lower income rural residents tend to have concrete or dirt floors, palm board walls, and metal or thatched roofs. Even if they have electricity, rural

homes often lack modern appliances (see *Sustenance and Health*). Consequently, the kitchen and bathroom are often separate structures. The poorest rural residents, often agricultural workers from Haiti or of Haitian descent (see *Political and Social Relations*), live in austere concrete barracks or clusters of **bohios** (wooden shacks) called **bateyes** without electricity or adequate sanitation.

Family Structure

In Dominican families, the father is traditionally the primary breadwinner and head of the household, while the mother is typically responsible for all domestic tasks and childcare. Many households include extended relatives, and other relations traditionally live in close proximity. Dominicans revere their elders, with children typically caring for their parents as they get older. Accordingly, nursing homes are uncommon and generally reserved for the ailing or those without close kin. Trusted family friends are often brought into the close-knit kin network as **compadres** (godparents).

With many Dominicans leaving home to seek better economic opportunities and due to the country's high adolescent fertility rate (see p. 4 of *Sex and Gender*), family composition tends to vary today. Many households are headed by single mothers, while others consist of grandparents caring for grandchildren, whose parents have emigrated. Dominicans abroad tend to maintain strong familial ties, sending earnings to family members back home (see *Economics and Resources*).

Children

Today, Dominican families have far fewer children than in the past (see *Sex and Gender*). Although the legal working age is 14, young children in poorer families are expected to help supplement the family income, typically by working in agriculture, mining, street vending, or car washing. Children living in poverty often face abuse, violence, restricted access to education (see *Learning and Knowledge*), and sexual exploitation (see *Sex and Gender*).

Birth: Before a child is born, the mother's family and friends typically hold a baby shower, bringing gifts for both the mother and child. Following the birth, some mothers attach a bracelet with red beads and black gemstones to their baby to protect against the *mal de ojo*, ("evil eye"), believed to bring misfortune.



Rites of Passage

Many Dominicans observe Roman Catholic rites of passage to mark milestones, such as baptizing their children within a few weeks of birth and celebrating their first communion around age 10. Dominicans typically mark their daughters' 15th birthday and entrance into womanhood with a formal party called a **Fiesta de Quince** (Party of 15) or *quinceañera* marked by a special mass and festive celebration with friends and family.

Dating and Courtship: Boys and girls typically begin dating in their mid-teens. Socializing rarely involves a couple spending time alone. Instead, groups of friends gather in public settings, often going for drives, listening to music, or attending dances, parties, movies, and baseball games (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). When a couple decides to marry, the groom traditionally asks for permission from the bride's father, although this custom is increasingly rare.

Weddings: Before the formal wedding festivities, families and friends often gather to throw bridal showers or bachelor and

bachelorette parties. Wedding festivities typically include a religious ceremony in a church followed by a reception at a hotel or banquet hall with feasting and dancing. Alternatively, couples have a civil ceremony followed by an intimate gathering of family and close friends. Because weddings can be expensive and divorce fees high, some couples forego formal ceremonies altogether and instead enter into a union **por la ventana** (“through the window” or common-law marriage), which grants couples some rights after 3 years of cohabitation. Most Dominicans marry in their early 20s. Women who wait to marry

until later in life or choose to remain single are subject to significant stigma.

Divorce

In recent years, divorce has become increasingly common and less stigmatized. In 2024, the DR's

divorce rate is 2.7 per 1,000 inhabitants, higher than the US rate (2.4). According to law, a couple must announce their divorce in the newspaper 8 days after the proceedings or it is not valid.

Death

Following a death, the family typically holds a **velorio** (wake) at home or in a funeral parlor that may include an all-night vigil. During this period, friends and relatives visit to pay respects, grieve, and reminisce with the family of the deceased. After 1-2 days, a priest presides over a religious service, with mourners accompanying the coffin in a procession to the cemetery for burial afterwards. For the 9 days following the funeral, a period known as the **novena**, Catholic families say special prayers at home or attend special church services. Similar remembrances are typically held each month after a death, culminating in a special 1-year anniversary mass. Some funeral traditions vary by region or combine Catholic rituals with Voodoo traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, some Dominicans reverse all mirrors after a loved one's death to avoid catching sight of the ghost and empty all water vessels in the home to prevent the spirit from bathing in them.



5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Traditionally, the Dominican Republic (DR) has had a male-dominated society, where ***machismo*** (strong masculine pride) is counterbalanced by female subservience (***marianismo***). The Dominican social system is patriarchal, whereby men hold most power and authority. Although women and men have equal rights before the law, traditional attitudes continue to hinder women's full participation in educational, economic, and political spheres.

Gender Roles and Work

Dominican society historically maintains a distinct division between the genders, with women responsible for most household chores and childcare, even if they work outside the home. In rural areas, women often tend the family crops and collect water and firewood in addition to their household work, all completed without modern conveniences.



Labor Force: In 2024, about 53% of women worked outside the home, a lower rate than in neighboring Haiti (60%), Jamaica (61%), and the US (57%). Men traditionally predominate in agriculture and construction, while women comprise the majority of workers in tourism and the DR's ***maquilas*** (export-oriented assembly factories – see *Economics and Resources*). Forced to relocate for such jobs, many women leave their children at home in the care of family members (see *Family and Kinship*). Female workers in the tourist industry tend to work long hours for little pay, while those in *maquilas* are typically subjected to poor working conditions, such as long hours, sub-minimum pay, and high rates of workplace accidents and abuse (see *Time and Space*). While women occupy some 58% of professional and technical jobs, they remain underrepresented at upper management levels, comprising just 37% of legislators, senior officials, and managers.

Gender and the Law

Despite legal guarantees of gender equality, authorities often fail



to enforce laws, and employers neglect workplace protections without repercussion. For example, the labor code outlines maternity protections, yet many employers unlawfully terminate the employment of pregnant and nursing women. Despite its

criminalization, workplace harassment is widespread. Many women are unaware of their rights or reluctant to report abuses due to employer intimidation.

Gender and Politics

Since women gained the right to vote in 1942, their political participation has steadily increased. In 2020, President Abinader swore in females for 27 of the 31 presidentially-appointed provincial governor positions, and in 2024, some 37% of national parliament seats were held by women, slightly lower than in Jamaica (27%) and the US (29%). While the DR has never had a female President, it had its first female Vice President (VP) in 2000. For the 2020 election, all major parties nominated female VP candidates, and in August 2020, Raquel Peña took office as VP (see *Political and Social Relations*). Although laws require equal numbers of male and female candidates for elected posts, women remain underrepresented in political and governmental roles.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

The repressive Trujillo regime (see *History and Myth*) used sexual assault as a way to intimidate citizens. Today, GBV remains widespread, with the DR among the five most violent Latin American countries for women in 2025. Experts attribute widespread sexual assault and domestic abuse to several causes, notably the widespread *machismo*-related notions that men naturally wield power over women, and that women “provoke” violence when they do not comply with male

expectations regarding their dress or behavior. Despite laws criminalizing GBV, victims often fail to report assault due to the social stigma attached to crimes combined with their lack of trust in the authorities to protect them and prosecute perpetrators. Despite government efforts to improve prosecution rates, the scale of abuse exceeds the government's ability to adequately respond. Further, counseling services, educational programs, and victims' shelters are usually underfunded.

Prostitution is legal, and the DR's extensive sex tourism industry targets women and children living in poverty. Undocumented Haitian workers (see *Political and Social Relations*) are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking, as are minors, with 1 in 5 sex workers under age 18 in 2022. While the government has prioritized the prosecution of sex trafficking cases and introduced harsher penalties for offenders, abuse continues. US military personnel are prohibited from patronizing businesses tied to prostitution or human trafficking.

Las Mariposas: the Mirabal Sisters

The DR has had many prominent female activists, most notably the three Mirabal sisters, popularly known as *las mariposas* ("the butterflies"). In the late 1950s, the sisters helped organize and grow an underground resistance movement against the repressive Trujillo regime (see *History and Myth*). In retaliation, Trujillo ordered their murder. On November 25, 1960, government forces beat the sisters to death then faked a car accident in an attempt to cover up the crime.

In subsequent years, the sisters became symbols of both democratic and feminist resistance across the Caribbean and Latin America. In 1999, the United Nations designated November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The day's annual commemoration in Santo Domingo typically attracts thousands of women to protest gender-based violence.

Sex and Procreation

Dominicans traditionally view sexual intimacy as a private matter appropriate only within marriage. Nevertheless, according to *machismo* norms, it is socially acceptable for men to boast about their sexual conquests, while women are expected to remain chaste. At 2.2 births per woman, the DR's fertility rate is higher than that of Jamaica (1.4) and the US (1.6), but lower than that of neighboring Haiti (2.7).

Child marriage or partnership (before age 18) is most common in poverty-stricken rural communities, with some 32% of Dominican girls married by age 18 as of 2023. Many older men had taken young girls into their homes as common-law wives. Child marriage plus inadequate sexual education, widespread



assault, and social and religious stigma attached to contraceptive use contribute to the DR's high adolescent fertility rate. In 2023, there were some 53 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19, significantly higher than the Latin America and

Caribbean average (51) and the US rate (13). In June 2021, President Abinader issued the law changing the legal age to marry in the DR is 18 years of age.

Abortion is illegal under all circumstances and can result in a prison sentence of up to 2 years for the woman and 20 years for the provider. As a result, many victims of sexual violence are forced to obtain dangerous, illegal abortions, with experts estimating that some 8% of annual maternal deaths result from illegal abortions.

Homosexuality in the DR

The criminal code does not prohibit homosexuality. The law recognizes neither same-sex marriage nor civil unions.

At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for DR. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Spanish is the official language of the Dominican Republic (DR) and the primary language of business, government, education, and the media.

Spanish

Spanish explorers and conquerors brought their language to the region beginning in the 15th century (see *History and Myth*). Today, some 95% of Dominicans speak Spanish



(**español**) as their native language. Spanish uses the same alphabet as English with three additional consonants – ch, ll (pronounced like “y” as in yam), and ñ (pronounced like the “ny” in the word canyon). The similar alphabet, consistent spelling patterns, and Latin base make Spanish relatively easy for English speakers to learn.

While it is mutually intelligible with other Spanish dialects spoken around the world, Dominican Spanish differs in its use of certain words and grammatical structures. Like many other Caribbean Spanish-speakers, most Dominicans shorten and drop the “s” from words, such as pronouncing **pescados** (fishes) as **pecao**. In Santo Domingo, speakers often replace an “r” sound with an “l,” such as changing **perdón** (pardon) to **peldón**. Also common are so-called **dominicanismos**, words and expressions that are unique to the DR, like **vaina** (nuisance), **Qué lo qué?** (“what’s up”), and **jeva/jevo** (girl/boy). Some Dominican words, like **guineo** (banana) and **fucu** (bad luck), derive from West African languages brought by enslaved people centuries ago (see *History and Myth*).

Dominican Spanish also contains some words adopted from the now-extinct language spoken by Hispaniola’s indigenous Taíno

people (see *History and Myth*). Examples include **chin** (a little bit) and **conuco** (vegetable plot). **Bateyes**, a term describing settlements of agricultural workers (see *Family and Kinship*), derives from the Taíno word for an open gathering area. Other Taíno words now common in Spanish and English include **huracán** (hurricane), **tabaco** (tobacco), **patata** (potato), **canoa** (canoe), and **hamaca** (hammock).

Other Languages

The DR is also home to speakers of various immigrant languages. Due to tensions with neighboring Haiti (see *Political and Social Relations*), little up-to-date information is available, but as of 2023, some 595,000 Haitian Creole speakers resided in the DR. In 2024, around 52,000 Dominicans speak Chinese varieties, and about 22,000 speak Creole English, mostly immigrants from former British Caribbean colonies like Tortola and St. Thomas. Arabic, Japanese, and Catalan (spoken in northeastern Spain) are also present in smaller numbers.

English

Hundreds of freed US slaves settled on the DR's northeastern Samaná peninsula in 1824. The area remained a pocket of native English speakers for over a century. In the mid-20th century, Rafael Trujillo's "dominicization" movement (see *History and Myth*) violently enforced "Spanish only" laws that discouraged English use. Today, few Dominicans beyond major tourist areas speak and understand English. An English-Spanish hybrid developed by Dominicans living abroad (see *Political and Social Relations*) is known as "*Dominicanish*." Examples include **jaiueyes** (highways) and **dénme un brei** ("give me a break"). Further, decades of US occupation (see *History and Myth*) resulted in the introduction of US military terminology to the country. For example, some Dominicans use **zafacon** (safety can) for waste bin and **bividi** (BVD) for undergarments.



Communication Overview

Effective communication in the DR requires not only knowledge of Spanish but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and



interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Dominican communication patterns reflect an emphasis on politeness, courtesy, and respect. While some Dominicans give unsolicited comments on appearance, they do not consider such comments impolite, and foreign nationals should not view them as personal slights. Dominicans sometimes share deep emotions or personal life details with acquaintances, though they tend to reserve intimate trust or **confianza** for a small circle of friends and kin.

The value Dominicans place on politeness is evident in a widely-held preference for indirect or non-specific answers. For example, although Dominicans may suggest **mañana** (tomorrow) when prompted for a timeline, they rarely mean the next day. Instead, *mañana* serves as an ambiguous placeholder for next week, month, or even never. Dominicans also tend to provide a positive response to most requests in order to avoid disappointment. Accordingly, foreign nationals should not interpret a “yes” or noncommittal answer as a promise of action or neutral. Instead, such an answer might actually be negative.

Some Dominicans preface most references to future occurrences with **Sí Dios quiere** (“God willing”) to avoid tempting fate. Further, many Dominicans follow most positive statements with **Gracias a Dios** (“Thanks be to God”) and compliments with **Dios lo/la bendiga** (“God bless him/her”).

As is common in Latin America, ***machismo*** attitudes (see *Sex and Gender*) are widespread, with men sometimes making derogatory and suggestive comments about women to their male friends or directly to women. Foreign nationals should avoid participating in such discussions.

Greetings

Dominicans usually greet friends and relatives with an embrace and a kiss on the cheek and offer a handshake to acquaintances and strangers. In business settings, a handshake is appropriate, though a man should wait for the woman to initiate the greeting. Dominicans also use a variety of verbal greetings, most of which refer to the time of day. ***Buenos días*** (“good morning”) and ***buenas tardes*** (“good afternoon/evening”) are the most common.

Forms of Address

Forms of address depend on age, social status, and relationship but are generally formal and courteous. In all but the most informal



situations, Dominicans use titles of respect such as ***señor*** (Mr.), ***señora*** (Mrs.), and ***señorita*** (for young/unmarried women). To demonstrate special deference to elders or those of a higher social class, Dominicans use the honorifics ***Don*** (for males) or ***Doña*** (for females) along with the first name. Professional titles such as ***doctor/a*** (doctor), ***profesor/a*** (teacher), and ***ingeniero/a*** (engineer) may be used with the first or last name(s). Similarly, Dominicans refer to those who have completed a university degree as ***licenciado/a***.

Spanish has different “you” pronouns and verb conjugations depending on the level of formality and respect required. Dominicans tend to use the polite ***usted*** in formal settings, although some business colleagues prefer the familiar ***tú*** typically used with friends, family, and younger people. Foreign nationals should use *usted* with all conversation partners unless directed otherwise.

Names: A Dominican name typically comprises one or two first names and two last names. A Dominican with two first names may use the first or both names. For example, a man with the first names Jesús María may be known by both names or simply Jesús. Dominicans often use nicknames that reference personal characteristics such as ethnicity, height, and weight.

A Dominican's two last names indicate his family heritage. For example, in the full name of former President Danilo Medina Sánchez, Medina is his father's family name, while Sánchez is his mother's. Dominicans often shorten the full name by omitting the maternal family name, as Danilo Medina often does. Upon marriage, a woman traditionally replaces her maternal family name with her husband's paternal name, while adding **de** (from)



as in the name of former Vice President, Margarita Cedeño de Fernández, though she is commonly known as Margarita Cedeño.

Conversational Topics

After initial polite greetings, Dominicans typically engage in light conversation about

family, sports, or music. They enjoy humor and may initiate lighthearted teasing. To avoid offense, foreign nationals should avoid discussing politics, religion, and the DR's relationship with neighboring Haiti (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Gestures

Dominicans do not beckon with their index fingers, instead gesturing with an open hand. To signal “no,” they wave the index finger back and forth. To point, Dominicans purse their lips in the indicated direction and to demonstrate a lack of understanding, wrinkle their nose.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Spanish
Hello	Hola
Good morning/evening	Buenos días / Buenas tardes
Good night	Buenas noches
Goodbye	Adiós
Your identification please	Su cedula, por favor
How are you?	¿Cómo está usted?
What is your name?	¿Cuál es su nombre? / ¿Cómo se llama?
My name is ____	Me llamo ____
I am well	Estoy bien
Yes	Sí
No	No
Please	Por favor
Thank you	Gracias
You are welcome	De nada
I'm sorry	Lo siento
I don't understand	No entiendo
What does ____ mean?	¿Qué significa ____?
What is this?	¿Qué es esto?
What time is it?	¿Qué hora es?
Is there a toilet?	¿Hay servicios?
I would like a ____	Quisiera un/a ____
What do you want?	¿Qué quiere usted?
How do you say ____?	¿Cómo se dice ____?
...in English?	...en inglés?
...in Spanish?	...en español?
I'd like to buy...	Quisiera comprar...
How much is it?	¿Cuánto cuesta?
Where can I buy a ticket?	¿Dónde puedo comprar un billete?
Please tell me when we get to...	¿Puede avisarme cuando lleguemos a...?
Where's the grocery store?	¿Dónde está el supermercado?
I'd like to rent a car	Quisiera alquilar un coche
Where is the doctor?	¿Dónde está el médico?
Call the police!	¡Llame a la policía!
Call an ambulance!	¡Llame a una ambulancia!

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 96%
- Male: 95%
- Female: 96% (2023)

Early Education

Before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors (see *History and Myth*), most regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations.

Education in Colonial Dominican Republic

Following Spain's conquest and colonization of the region, most educational efforts were associated with attempts to convert the indigenous inhabitants to Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*), with various Roman Catholic religious orders establishing missions to provide instruction in the Catholic faith. By contrast, the Spanish elite had additional educational opportunities, such as a school of general studies that opened in Santo Domingo in 1518. Some 20 years later, the Pope (leader of the Catholic Church in Rome) elevated the school's status, making it the Americas' first university. Modeled on contemporaneous European institutions, this **Universidad Pontificia de Santo Tomás de Aquino** (Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas) offered courses of study in medicine, law, theology, and the arts. For the next 200 years, the university, known the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) today, remained the nation's primary educational institution.



Education in the 19th Century

Formal educational opportunities decreased during the 22-year Haitian occupation in the early 19th century (see *History and*

Myth), and the Universidad Pontificia de Santo Tomás de Aquino was forced to close. In the decade following the DR's 1844 declaration of independence (see *History and Myth*), just two public schools were in operation. The national education system remained underdeveloped until President Ulises Heureaux's 1882-99 tenure (see *History and Myth*) brought increased education investment, the construction of elementary and secondary schools, and rising attendance rates. The period also saw the influx of Puerto Ricans and Cubans who established schools at all grade levels. In 1881, poet and educator Salomé Ureña opened the ***Instituto de Señoritas***, the DR's first institution of higher education for women.

Education in the 20th Century

During its early 20th century military occupation (see *History and Myth*), the US provided significant aid for education. Following his 1930 seizure of power (see *History and Myth*), Rafael Trujillo



relied on US aid to carry out largescale school construction projects. As Secretary of Education in Trujillo's regime, future President Joaquin Balaguer (see *History and Myth*) established tuition-free university education and opened libraries. During the US' mid-1960s intervention (see *History and Myth*), American funding supported school construction and educational television programming.

Through the 1970s, public school students faced inadequate facilities and a chronic lack of qualified teachers. Meanwhile, curriculum modernization reforms had little impact, and literacy rates remained low. Nevertheless, attendance rates rose significantly, with primary enrollment growing by some 20% and secondary increasing nearly four-fold between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s. In 1997, a new General Law of Education introduced curricula standards and achievement targets,

facilitated public and private partnerships in schools, and established 1 year of compulsory pre-primary education.

Modern Education

Government investment in public education in the 21st century remained low and outcomes failed to improve. Responding to widespread public dissatisfaction, government doubled education expenditures in 2012. As of 2023, it is 5.7% of GDP, higher than Haiti (1%) but lower than Jamaica (6%) and the US (6%).

By law, public education today is free and mandatory for children aged 5-18, although enrollment and attendance are not strictly enforced—in 2017, average schooling was about 14 years. While the Ministry of Education (MoE) oversees the educational system, it cooperates closely with the Roman Catholic Church

(see *Religion and Spirituality*).

An accord with the Holy See (the governing body of the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican in Rome) mandates religious courses based on Catholic doctrine in all



public schools and gives the Church authority over textbook selections. In 2018, the MOE incorporated 15 private Catholic schools into the public education system and encouraged reform centered on Christian values. Although private schools are exempt from the religious education law, most are associated with Christian churches and consequently incorporate Christian teachings into their curricula.

Academic achievement is poor. In a 2018 assessment of 79 countries, Dominican students ranked last in science and math and next-to-last in reading. The ranking has improved some in 2022, in science and math the DR is no longer last but still in one of the lowest. The reading ranking has also improved but is still low. DR schools also have low attendance and high dropout

rates, with just 74% of students completing primary education and 78% completing secondary in 2022.

While education is free, the cost of textbooks, uniforms, and supplies prevents many families from sending their children to school. Other students quit school to work and help support their families (see *Family and Kinship*). While laws prohibit the expulsion of pregnant students, social stigma and lack of childcare lead many young mothers to leave school (see *Sex and Gender*).

In 2024, nearly 80% of students attended overcrowded schools. To reduce overcrowding, the government pledged to increase educational capacity, adding some 365 schools offering an 8-hour school day in 2019-20. Although has improved, overcrowding continues to be an issue. Other improvements include adding bus routes to make it likelier that rural students attend school. To integrate technology into the classroom, the



MoE's digital education program distributed 300,000 laptops to public-school students in 2019.

Nevertheless, the poor quality of public schools leads many upper-class Dominicans to

enroll their children in private schools called **colegios**. Unlike public schools, private programs often offer bilingual instruction in Spanish and English as well as extracurricular and afterschool programs. In 2024, some 20% of secondary students were attending private schools.

Pre-Primary: Pre-primary attendance is low, with only 33% of children 0-5 enrolled in such programs in 2021.

Primary Education: *Educación básica* or basic education comprises 6 grades starting at age 6. The curriculum focuses on Spanish, English, math, science, social studies, history, civics, art, physical education, and religious studies. In 2023, some

93% of children the appropriate age were enrolled in basic education.

Secondary Education: Secondary education comprises 4 years in an academic or technical/vocational program. After the 8th grade, students must pass national exams in Spanish, math, and the social and natural sciences. In their final year, some 40% of secondary students pass the ***Prueba de Orientación y Medición Académica*** (Orientation and Academic Measurement Test) required for admission to higher education programs. Graduates of both academic and technical tracks may continue to post-secondary education. In 2023, about 78% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education. Of note, girls and urban-dwellers tend to enroll at higher rates than boys and rural residents. Girls represented some 62% of technical/vocational students in 2018, but in 2023 the percentage has dropped to only 7%.

Post-Secondary: While the UASD remains the only public university, the DR is also home to 7 private universities and some 26 other institutions of higher learning, such as trade schools, technical-vocational institutions, and teacher training colleges. Prominent private universities include the ***Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra*** (Catholic University Mother and Teacher) and ***Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña*** (Pedro Henríquez Ureña National University). While public university fees are low for citizens, living costs associated with pursuing education in urban areas make enrollment largely inaccessible to rural students. Consequently, while 77% of female Dominicans aged 18-24 attended higher education programs in 2022, just 43% of male residents of that age were enrolled. Overall, women attend university at higher rates than men, with some 23% of women aged 25 and older having completed a postsecondary degree in 2023, compared to just 14% of men.



8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Dominicans tend to view close interpersonal connections and friendships as vital to successful business. A casual attitude towards punctuality prevails alongside a strong work ethic.

Time and Work

The work week typically runs Monday-Friday with hours varying by establishment type. Many shops open Monday-Saturday from 9am-7:30pm, while grocery stores hours are typically Monday-Saturday 8am-10pm and Sunday 8am-2pm. Most banks are open Monday-Friday from 8:30am-4:30pm, and some open briefly on Saturday mornings. Post office hours are typically Monday-Friday from 7:30am-2:30pm. Government offices are open Monday-Friday from 7:30am-2:30pm. While some businesses close for a short lunch from about 12pm-1pm, others take a longer break in the early afternoon. Although most businesses close on Sundays, a few shops remain open. In rural areas, operating hours tend to be informal, varying according to owners' preferences.



Working Conditions: The legal work week may not exceed 44 hours and the workday 8 hours. For overtime hours, employees receive a 35% bonus. The law also sets health and safety standards, stipulates that 80% of a company's employees must be Dominican citizens, and sets minimum wages that vary by economic sector. Many Dominican workers receive a month's salary bonus in December, when work schedules significantly relax. Despite these and other benefits and protections, lax enforcement often results in unsafe working conditions, low wages, and extended workdays. Further, as of 2024, some 55% of the working population labored in the informal sector, where workers typically earn well below the government-mandated minimum wage, and violations such as workplace discrimination, deficient workplace safety standards, and child labor can occur.

Time Zone: The DR adheres to Atlantic Standard Time (AST), which is 4 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 1 hour ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). The DR does not observe daylight savings time.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- January 6: ***Día de los Tres Magos*** (Three Kings Day)
- January 21: Our Lady of Altagracia Day (see *Religion and Spirituality*)
- January 26: Duarte Day (honoring Juan Pablo Duarte—see p. 6 of *History and Myth*)
- February 27: Independence Day
- March/April: Good Friday (date varies)
- May 1: Labor Day/Workers' Day
- June: Corpus Christi (date varies)
- August 16: Restoration Day
- September 24: Our Lady of Las Mercedes Day
- November 6: Constitution Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

Holidays that fall in the middle of the week may be observed on the preceding or following Monday.

Date Notation: Like the US, the DR uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Dominicans write the day first, followed by the month and year.

Time and Business

Dominican businesses tend to be hierarchical in structure, with final decisions typically requiring top level approval. Further, the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, both professional and familial, are typically an integral part of business. As a result, rapport-building activities and social gatherings are common, and business dealings may unfold at an unhurried pace.

Generally, Dominicans tend to have a relaxed attitude to time, meaning meetings tend to begin and end late.

Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in the DR depends on the nature of the relationship. Friends and family generally observe less personal space than acquaintances or strangers.

Touch: In business settings, greetings usually include little touching beyond the handshake, though men sometimes combine slight touches on the arms or elbows with the handshake or exchange pats on the back. Dominicans typically reserve physical affection for family and friends. While close friends regardless of sex might hug or exchange cheek kisses, public displays of affection between romantic partners are rare.

Eye Contact: Dominicans typically make brief but direct eye contact during greetings and maintain eye contact in conversations as evidence of interest and confidence.

Photographs

Some churches, museums, landmarks, and military installations may prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should acquire a Dominican's consent before taking his photo. Explicit permission is particularly important when photographing children.



Driving

Lax enforcement of traffic laws and poor road conditions make driving hazardous, particularly at night and

during blackouts. Some drivers disregard traffic signs, signals, and laws. Many roads lack clear markings and contain large potholes, debris, and other hazards, and those in rural areas are often unpaved and prone to mudslides and flooding. Dominicans usually grant larger vehicles the right-of-way, and drivers who hit livestock are expected to pay compensation to the owner. In 2021, the DR's rate of traffic-related deaths was 27 per 100,000 people, about double the US rate (14). As in the US, Dominicans drive on the right side of the road.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

The dress, recreation, music, and arts of the Dominican Republic (DR) reflect indigenous, European, African, and Christian and folk religious traditions.

Dress and Appearance

Dominicans dress proudly, tending to present a neat and clean appearance, with many urban residents following the latest international fashion trends. Despite the tropical heat, men typically wear dress shirts with long trousers, and women dresses or skirts/pants with blouses. On Sunday afternoons, many Dominicans take part in **figureo** (which loosely translates as “to be seen”), dressing up in their finest clothes to stroll through town, attend church services, or visit friends and family.

Traditional: Dominicans typically wear traditional dress only for special events. Reflecting African and Spanish colonial influences, traditional female dress varies somewhat by region but typically combines flowing, ruffled skirts with blouses of silk or cotton trimmed with lace, sometimes tied at the waist with a sash. Color combinations also vary but are usually bright and contrasting, with the skirt’s color sometimes indicating the wearer’s marital status. Traditional male clothing consists of a collared, long-sleeved white shirt (**chacabana**) with dark pants and sometimes a straw hat.

Recreation and Leisure

Dominicans typically spend their leisure time with family and friends.

Rural families often go to town on Sundays, visiting the plaza (town center) to meet friends, people watch, or share a drink at the local **colmado** (convenience store). Other common activities include attending church, shopping, sharing meals, dancing, and playing or watching sports.



Festivals: Many festivals reflect the historical predominance of Roman Catholicism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, towns celebrate their patron saint's day every year with festivities that include religious ceremonies, processions, music, dancing, and feasting (***fiestas patronales***). The Christmas season begins with celebrations in early December. On Christmas Eve, Catholics share an elaborate meal followed by a midnight mass. The Christmas seasons ends on Three King's Day on January 6, when children receive additional holiday gifts.

The Easter season traditionally begins weeks prior to the official holiday, when Dominicans celebrate several days of Carnival with parties, fireworks, concerts, and games. The largest festivities occur in Santo Domingo, La Vega, and other cities, where costumed celebrants form a large, boisterous procession that parades past thousands of spectators and lasts several hours.



The Easter holiday is celebrated over several days called ***Semana Santa*** ("Holy Week," consisting of Palm Sunday, Maundy

Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday). Celebrations include religious processions and biblical reenactments. ***Gagá*** (known as ***Rara*** in neighboring Haiti) is a festive procession organized by followers of Dominican Voodoo (see *Religion and Spirituality*) during *Semana Santa* that features dancing, chanting, drumming, and traditional percussion instruments (see "Music and Dance" below).

Sports

Baseball: ***Béisbol*** (baseball) is the DR's most popular sport. Introduced in the late 19th century by Cuban plantation owners, baseball quickly grew in popularity, especially during the early 20th-century US occupation (see *History and Myth*). Already skilled in the English game of cricket (a bat-and-ball game introduced to the region decades earlier), Dominicans were familiar with the concepts of fielding, batting, and pitching. The

first organized, professional leagues emerged in the 1890s, and in the 1930s, Dominican players began attracting international attention for their talent and skill. By the 1980s, hundreds of Dominican players filled the rosters of US professional teams.

Dominicans typically begin playing baseball from a young age, practicing with sticks and coconut husks and discarded items as bases. Promising young players may attend one of many baseball academies, though only about 2% of these young athletes go on to make a living in baseball. The DR's professional league (*Liga de Invierno* or "Winter League") includes six teams. Its champion earns the right to compete at the annual Caribbean World Series.

Today, Dominicans comprise about 10% of players on US minor and major league teams. Over 400



Dominicans play on Major League Baseball (MLB) teams alone, making the DR the largest exporter of MLB players to the US. Several Dominican players have earned significant international fame, notably outfielder Sammy Sosa, hitter David Ortiz, and pitchers Juan Marichal and Pedro Martinez, both inductees into MLB's Hall of Fame. Generally, the best Dominican players are revered and rank high in Dominican society (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Other Sports: Other popular sports include boxing, volleyball, basketball, and soccer. While the government has tried to suppress it, cockfighting remains popular in some rural regions, where men bet on the outcomes of confrontations between **gallos** (gamecocks) equipped with metal or bone spurs.

Music and Dance

Dominican folk music typically features a variety of percussion instruments such as the **güira** (a hollow gourd struck with a forked stick), **maraca** (wooden rattle filled with stones or beans), and **marimba** (wooden xylophone), along with flutes and guitars.

Merengue: This style of music and dance is the DR's most popular. Danced by couples, *merengue* flows rhythmically and follows a two-four or four-four pattern with a heavily emphasized downbeat. *Merengue*'s distinctive sound is produced by several traditional instruments, notably a **tambura** (a two-headed drum), **melodeon** (similar to an accordion), and a modernized *güira* (a perforated metal cylinder tapped and scraped with a metal or plastic rod). Lyrics express themes of love, daily life, and social or political commentary by using irony, humor, or provocative allusions.

Merengue has become one of Latin America's most popular and influential styles. Santo Domingo and Puerto Plata both host annual *merengue* festivals that attract thousands of international fans. Some of the genre's famed artists include Juan Luis Guerra, Johnny Ventura, Luis Vargas, and Joseíto Mateo, among others.

Bachata: This style of slow, romantic, and sentimental ballad with a guitar accompaniment emerged in the mid-20th century in poor, urban neighborhoods. Legendary *bachata* musicians include Edilio Paredes, Augusto Santos, and Juan Luis Guerra.

Other Genres: Dominicans also enjoy other Latin music genres such as Spanish **bolero**, Cuban **danzón**, Mexican **ranchera**, Colombian **salsa** and **cumbia**, and Puerto Rican **reggaetón**. Some artists combine *bachata* and *merengue* styles with *reggaetón* and rap to create distinctly Dominican styles. Some



rock musicians combine Gagá musical traditions and other folk styles to create new fusion rock forms.

Folk Dance: This style features both African influences and Spanish traditions. For

example, dancers from the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos of Villa Mella (an organization established in the 16th century by enslaved Africans) celebrate both Christianity's Holy

Spirit and the West African god of the dead, Kalunga. Similarly, the **baile de palo** (“long-drum dance”) is an African-derived couple’s dance often associated with practitioners of Dominican Voodoo (see *Religion and Spirituality*) but performed by Dominicans of all traditions. By contrast, the **sarandunga** draws inspiration from a Spanish peasant dance, and the **guarapo** and **sarambo** are both tap dances with Spanish origins.

Literature

Dominican literature bloomed in the mid-19th century, when novelists and poets promoted a sense of national consciousness during the Haitian occupation (see *History and Myth*). During this period, Manuel de Jesus Galván’s works fostered nostalgia for the vanished Taíno civilization, while depicting the brutality of the early Spanish conquerors (see *History and Myth*). In the early 20th century Gastón Fernando Deligne led the DR’s modernist movement, and Américo Lugo was a prominent essayist, poet, and historian.

Later, works focused on social commentary such as the short stories criticizing the ruling elites by President Juan Bosch (see *History and Myth*). Many contemporary writers focus on recent Dominican history and daily life. For example, Julia Alvarez’s best-selling novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a fictionalized account of the lives of the Mirabal sisters (see *Sex and Gender*).

Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Folk arts and crafts have experienced a resurgence in recent years. Prominent products include ceramics and pottery from the Cibao region and jewelry made from seashells, coral, tortoiseshell, amber, and **larimar** (a semiprecious stone discovered in 1974 and found only in the DR).

Handicrafts include woven baskets, leatherwork, and woodcarving. The town of Salcedo is known for its hand-carved objects made from calabash (a type of gourd).



10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Sharing lengthy meals with friends and family is a common social event. Dominican culinary traditions exhibit an array of indigenous and global influences using fresh, locally produced and brightly seasoned ingredients.

Dining Customs

Dominicans typically eat three daily meals and typically snack in the mid-morning and mid-afternoon. The mid-day meal is usually the largest and usually followed by a period of rest (see *Time and Space*). Women traditionally prepare all meals, often enlisting assistance from friends and relatives when entertaining guests. Residents of rural areas or poor urban neighborhoods often cook over a charcoal- or wood-burning stove (**fogón**),

contributing to deforestation (see *Political and Social Relations*).



Dominicans often drop by unannounced for short, informal visits. When guests arrive, hosts typically offer coffee, tea, or alcoholic drinks with light snacks. When invited

to a home for a formal meal or to celebrate a special occasion, guests usually arrive a few minutes late and often present the host with a small gift such as flowers or pastries. Hosts usually serve their guests first. After guests finish their portions, they must decline several offers if they do not want more servings. Diners typically take their time eating and tend to linger for hours over lively conversation. Evening meals are sometimes followed by music and dancing (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Diet

While varying somewhat by region, Dominican cuisine reflects Spanish, African, and indigenous Taíno influences (see *History and Myth*). Meals tend to highlight starches and meats over vegetables and dairy products. As a primary staple, rice is

incorporated into most meals, often served steamed or fried with chopped vegetables. Beans are another staple, typically stewed, mashed, and briefly cooked in oil or incorporated into a variety of soups and fillings. Common varieties include red kidney, pinto, black, and **guandules** (pigeon peas).

Other common sources of protein include chicken, goat, pork, and, to a lesser extent, beef. Along the coasts, Dominicans have access to a rich assortment of seafood, particularly lobster, grouper, conch, flounder, and red snapper. Starchy root vegetables – notably plantains (a member of the banana family), potatoes, yams, and cassava (also known as yuca or manioc) – are common across the country due to their versatility and low cost. Dominicans also use cassava to make bread in a technique developed by the Taíno people prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquerors. Other common vegetables include cabbage, squash, carrots, beets, corn, and string beans, among others.

Available year-round, popular fruits include guavas, pineapples, papayas, bananas, mangos, tamarind (a fibrous, sour fruit), and **guanábana** (soursop—a



small, green fruit with a soft, sweet interior). Coconuts feature prominently in coastal cuisine, where cooks sweeten dishes with chopped coconut, sauté or fry fish in coconut oil, and use coconut milk to thicken soups and stews. Common flavorings include chilies, citrus juices, coriander, pepper, cumin, cilantro, and vinegar, among others.

Popular Dishes and Meals

Common breakfast foods include ham and cheese sandwiches with fresh fruit, **mangú** (a dish of African origin that includes pureed plantains served with sautéed onions or other toppings), eggs, salami, fried cheese, and avocado. Served at about 1:00pm, a standard lunch is known as **plato del día** (“daily plate”) or **la bandera** (“the flag”) because its red beans, steamed rice, and stewed meat reflect the DR flag’s main colors of red,

white, and blue (see *Political and Social Relations*). The dish also typically includes fried plantains (**tostones**) and a tomato and lettuce salad dressed with oil and vinegar. Dinner is usually a lighter meal of boiled starchy vegetables, sandwiches, omelets, salads, or light soups, among other items. The poorest families only occasionally eat meat and instead subsist on plantains, beans, rice, salty cheese, and home-grown vegetables.



A popular meal for special occasions is **sancocho**, a hearty stew of several types of meat and root vegetables spiced with fresh coriander, hot chilies, and lemon, among other flavorings.

Usually served over rice, *sancocho* varies by region and family tradition but typically takes hours to prepare. Other common dishes include **chen-chen** (a corn dish similar to polenta); **pasteles en hoja** (a mixture of meat, boiled plantain, and spices wrapped in banana leaves and steamed); various sausages made of beef or pork; and **chicharrón** (deep-fried pork or chicken skin). Common desserts include **bizcocho dominicano** (a sweet cake with merengue frosting), **arroz con leche** (rice cooked in milk and sugar), **flan de queso** (a cheese custard), and **dulces** (sweetened fruit compotes served with salty cheese).

Eating Out

Restaurants in Santo Domingo, Santiago, and other larger cities range from upscale establishments specializing in international cuisine to inexpensive, casual eateries (**comedores**) serving *plato del día* and other Dominican staples. Small towns typically have just a few, casual restaurants serving Dominican food. Street stalls sell snacks like fresh fruits, **frío-frío** (snow cones), **pica pollo** (fried chicken), **pastelitos** and **empanadas** (meat or cheese-filled pastries) and **yaniqueques** (fried cakes of cornmeal, sugar, and milk). Along the coasts, small, open-air cafes specialize in freshly caught fried fish, seafood stews, and other fare. Most restaurants add a surcharge to the bill, but servers sometimes also expect a 10% tip for good service.

Beverages

Dominicans tend to drink tea and espresso-style coffee, usually black and laden with sugar, in the mornings and late afternoons. Freshly squeezed juices (**jugos naturales**) from native fruits such as passion fruit, papaya, oranges, tamarind, and mangos, among others are also popular. Dominicans also blend fruit juices with ice, condensed or evaporated milk, and sugar to make sweet, frothy smoothies (**batidas**). The DR's most popular *batida* is the **morir soñando** (meaning “to die dreaming”), which combines orange juice, milk, sugar, and crushed ice. Popular alcoholic beverages include rum (**ron**) aged in wooden casks into **blanco** (clear), **dorado** (golden), and **añejo** (dark) varieties;

locally-brewed beer (**cerveza**); and **mamajuana** (a mixture of rum, wine, honey soaked with dried bark and herbs).



Health Overview

While the overall health of Dominicans has improved in recent

decades, they continue to face communicable disease outbreaks and other serious health challenges. Life expectancy at birth has increased from about 67 to 74 years since 1990 and is slightly higher than the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) average (74) and lower than that of the US (77). Between 2000-23, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age one) decreased from 33 to 21 deaths per 1,000 live births, yet it remains higher than the US rate (5) and LAC average (14). Significantly, maternal mortality rose from 80 to 124 deaths per 100,000 live births between 2000-2023. This rate is higher than the LAC average (77) and significantly above the US rate (17).

Traditional Medicine

This method consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Dominican medicine centers on the use of herbal remedies to identify and treat illness and disease. Some remote communities lacking access to modern medicine tend to rely entirely on traditional remedies to treat both minor ailments

and serious and chronic illnesses like diabetes, respiratory disorders, and cancers. Other Dominicans supplement modern medicine with traditional therapies. In some regions, Dominicans consult traditional healers (*curanderos*), who treat physical or spiritual afflictions by performing certain rituals and communicating with the spirit world (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Modern Healthcare System

The government offers free, universal healthcare to all Dominicans through a network of public hospitals and clinics funded by a national insurance scheme. Together, these facilities provide basic preventative and curative services and long-term care associated with major illnesses like cancer, respiratory diseases, and cardiovascular illnesses. Still, some medicines, services, and special procedures such as x-rays and dental work require high out-of-pocket payments that prevent many Dominicans from receiving care.

Due to low government investment, public institutions are typically ill-equipped and understaffed. In some cases, admitted patients must provide their own bedding, food, and other essentials. Most facilities are overcrowded and lack medical personnel. According to recent estimates, the DR has only about 22 physicians per 10,000 people, lower than the World Health Organization's recommendation of 23, the LAC average (24), and the US rate (36). Widespread corruption and weak governance (see *Political and Social Relations*) often result in poor hospital management and prevent coordination between healthcare institutions, further reducing the quality of care.



Access to healthcare varies significantly. While Santo Domingo and other major cities offer high quality care, it is typically in privately-run clinics and hospitals that are unaffordable to most urban dwellers. Healthcare deteriorates substantially in rural areas, where small clinics staffed with workers with limited

medical knowledge deliver only basic services. To receive emergency services or treatment for long-term, serious illnesses, rural residents must typically travel long distances on poor roads to provincial hospitals.

Health Challenges

The leading causes of death are chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, which accounted for 72% of deaths in 2019. Preventable “external causes,” such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries resulted in about 15% of deaths, compared to the US rate of 7%.

Communicable diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, malaria, dengue fever, tuberculosis, and hepatitis, caused 13% of all deaths in 2019. These diseases disproportionately affect rural Dominicans and the population residing in crowded urban areas with limited access to clean water and sanitation (see *Family and Kinship*). Natural disasters, notably hurricanes (see *Political and Social Relations*), tend to worsen outbreaks of food and waterborne diseases by creating shortages of potable water, food, and medicine. Some 78,000 Dominicans live with HIV/AIDS, giving the country a prevalence rate among adults of

1% in 2024, lower than the Caribbean average and almost half the rate of neighboring Haiti.

Widespread poverty and inadequate maternal and neonatal care result in high maternal death and child malnutrition rates.

Further, some 18% of

children under 5 lack a birth certificate, meaning public institutions can deny them health services. The country has one of the lowest coverages of timely birth registration in Latin America and the Caribbean. Only 41 percent of children born in public maternity hospitals are registered before leaving these facilities. As of May 2025, the DR has confirmed 661,103 cases of COVID-19 and 4,384 deaths.



11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For centuries, regional inhabitants engaged in agriculture and trade in foodstuffs and plants such as cassava (a tuberous, starchy root – see *Sustenance and Health*), beans, and cotton with the populations of neighboring islands. Following their 15th-century conquest and colonization of the island, Spanish authorities initially focused on mining, using enslaved people for the dangerous work (see *History and Myth*).



Mining peaked around 1510 and subsequently declined in importance, prompting the Spaniards to introduce sugarcane cultivation and cattle-raising. As the island gradually lost value to the Spanish crown in the 17th century, farming largely remained limited to small crops of sugarcane, coffee, and cacao.

In the 19th century, the region gradually developed a plantation economy based on the large-scale production of sugar, cacao, and coffee for export. Nevertheless, political instability following the Dominican Republic's (DR) 1844 independence from Haiti (see *History and Myth*) prevented significant economic growth. Further, as various **caudillos** (military strongmen – see p. 6-8 of *History and Myth*) overspent government funds, the DR's domestic and foreign debt ballooned. The economy eventually stabilized in the early 20th century, when the US took over administration of the DR's debt and subsequently occupied the country (see *History and Myth*). During this period, the economies of the US and DR became tightly linked, and by 1920, 80% of Dominican exports were bound for the US.

Although the DR experienced economic stability and around 6% annual growth during Rafael Trujillo's repressive rule in the mid-20th century (see *History and Myth*), the distribution of wealth remained uneven and social inequalities became increasingly

pronounced. The DR retained its primarily agricultural economy until the 1960s, when the economy began to diversify, developing its mining, manufacturing, and tourism sectors and lessening its dependence on the sugar industry. Between 1950-90, the percentage of the workforce employed in the agriculture sector decreased from 73% to 35%.

Economic depression in the early 1980s compelled the DR to accept significant international aid and enact austerity measures. Their reversal following a change in administration in 1986 led to a severe economic crisis (see *History and Myth*). However, by the early 1990s, the economy recovered and grew rapidly through the remainder of the decade fueled by the growth of tourism, the development of free trade zones (FTZ – see “Industry” below), and the implementation of market-oriented economic reforms.

During a banking crisis in 2003, the government bailed out three collapsing Dominican banks. Amidst negative growth, the country's inflation rate quadrupled, the currency lost half its value, and interest rates soared. Nevertheless, the economy rebounded, averaging 9% growth between 2004-07.

In 2007, the DR joined the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), a trade bloc comprising the US, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the DR that expanded trade and increased investment flows. While GDP growth decreased from over 7% to 1% between 2007-09, the DR weathered the 2008-09 global financial crisis and began to rapidly recover.



Today, the DR has the Greater Antilles' the largest economy, followed by Cuba, and Latin America's ninth largest. Between 2005-22, it averaged over 5% growth, making it Latin America's fastest growing economy. It slowed in 2023 to 2.4% in 2023 and is projected to grow to over 5% in 2024 and beyond. Remittances from Dominicans living abroad remain an important part of the economy, comprising some 9% of GDP or \$10.5 billion in 2023.

Recently, the government has sought to stimulate economic growth through the “National Development Strategy for 2030.” This plan aims to reduce poverty, increase incomes, strengthen investor confidence, and ultimately move the DR from its current designation of “developing economy” to “advanced economy” status by 2030. Nevertheless, recent improvements to standards of living have been uneven, and although the country experienced a decrease in general poverty to 19% lower than the pre-pandemic level of 20% in 2019.

The DR’s economy is vulnerable to global economic shocks and natural disasters. Further, more than half of the DR’s workforce labors in the informal sector, which is untaxed and unregulated. Other challenges include corruption in both the business and political spheres, electricity shortages, and rising national debt. Given the country’s dependence on international tourism, exports, and remittances, the 2020 coronavirus pandemic has severely impacted the economy and threatens future growth. In December 2020, the economy contracted by about -1% due to the pandemic.



Services

Accounting for about 56% of GDP and 73% of employment in 2023, the services sector is the DR’s largest. Major subsectors include tourism, transportation, real estate, banking and financial services, and telecommunications. The growth of this sector in recent decades has been driven largely by the country’s booming tourism industry.

Tourism: Hosting over 10 million visitors in 2023, a record number, primarily from North America and Europe, the DR is the Caribbean region’s most visited tourist destination. An important source of foreign currency, the subsector represents some 8% of GDP and Travel and Tourism provides over 300 million jobs. Popular attractions include the white sand beaches and resorts

of Punta Cana, historical sites in Santo Domingo, museums, and restaurants.

Industry

Comprising 31% of GDP and 19% of employment in 2023, the industrial sector consists primarily of manufacturing, construction, and mining.

Manufacturing: Manufacturing contributed some 14% to GDP in 2023 and primarily focuses on food processing, textiles, cement, tobacco, electrical components, and medical devices.

FTZs: The DR is home to 79 FTZs hosting some 734 international businesses employing some 182,700. In 2022, FTZs granted companies tax and duty exemptions, and in 2021, FTZ exports totaled some \$7 billion and comprised over 3% of GDP. Many of the DR's **maquilas**, export-oriented assembly factories, operate in FTZs.

Construction: Comprising some 16% of GDP in 2022, construction is one of the DR'S fastest growing subsectors. The construction sector experienced practically zero growth of 0.6% in 2022, which was attributed to high material prices and delays in execution of state infrastructure work by the government.

Mining: Mining comprised some 2% of GDP and represented 26% of total exports in 2022. The DR is rich in gold, silver, nickel, and



bauxite and is home to one of the world's largest gold mines, Pueblo Viejo. A \$1.3 billion expansion of Pueblo Viejo announced in 2020 is primarily complete, with some final reconstruction still in process. The expansion is expected to increase the mine's export potential by \$22 billion and extend the mines operational life beyond 2040.

Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry. Once the economy's primary component, agriculture

accounted for just 6% of GDP and employed 7% of the workforce in 2023.

Farming and Livestock: About 10% of land is dedicated to permanent cultivation and about 25% is used as pasture. Most farming occurs on small holdings and is characterized by low productivity. The most important crops are sugarcane and rice, though cacao, tobacco, coffee, cotton, beans, potatoes, corn, and bananas are also produced. The most common livestock are cattle and pigs.



Currency

The Dominican **peso** (RD\$) is issued in six banknotes (RD\$50, 100, 200, 500, 1,000, and 2,000) and four coins (RD\$1, 5, 10, and 25). The **peso** divides into 100 **centavos** (cents), but *centavo* coins are rarely used and prices generally rounded to the nearest **peso**. Between 2015-22, \$1 averaged around RD\$48.83. In July 2024, \$1 was worth RD\$58.81.

Foreign Trade

The DR's imports, totaling \$30.6 billion in 2023, primarily consisted of petroleum, cars, jewelry, and broadcasting equipment from the US (42%), China (17%), Brazil (3.7%), Mexico (3.6%), and Spain (3.6%). In the same year, exports totaled \$13.8 billion and consisted of gold, medical instruments, rolled tobacco, low-voltage protection equipment, and bananas delivered to the US (53%), Switzerland (6.4%), Haiti (6.2%), and China (4%).

Foreign Aid

In 2022, the DR received some \$376 million in official development assistance, primarily from France, the US, South Korea, and the EU. US bilateral aid to the DR totaled \$79 million in 2022, \$25 million of which was earmarked for health initiatives. The US also provides significant funding, training, and equipment through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (see *Political and Social Relations*).

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Dominicans have access to an extensive physical infrastructure and modern telecommunications. While free speech and press are constitutionally protected, the government occasionally restricts those freedoms.

Transportation

Few Dominicans travel by privately-owned vehicle. Instead, the most common forms of transportation include foot, motorcycle, taxis, **motoconchos**

(motorcycle taxis), and buses. Most urban areas have reliable bus systems, and Santo Domingo has a two-line metro system. Transport modes beyond urban areas include **autobuses**, air-conditioned coaches that provide

scheduled service between major cities, and **guaguas**, vans or minibuses that travel rural areas making frequent stops.



Roadways

Of the DR's over 12,200 mi of roads, some 50% are paved. Three major highways radiate from Santo Domingo: the DR-1 **Autopista** (freeway) connects the northern city of Santiago, the DR-2 links western cities, and the DR-3 provides access to the East. Meanwhile, the **Carretera de Samaná** connects the eastern Samaná peninsula to the rest of the country.

Railways

The DR has about 300 mi of railway originally developed in the 19th-20th centuries to transport sugarcane to seaports (see *Economics and Resources*). Although the state railway closed during the 1980s, a few sugarcane operations still use rails to transport freight.

Ports and Waterways

The DR's three major seaports are Santo Domingo and Puerto Haina on the Caribbean coast and Puerto Plata on the Atlantic. While most rivers are navigable only by smaller boats, parts of

the Ozama River can accommodate large cargo and cruise ships.



Airways

Of the DR's 32 airports, 16 have paved runways. Serving 9.5 million passengers in 2024, Punta Cana

International airport is the DR's busiest and Caribbean region's second busiest. During 2020, Punta Cana Airport only registered 2 million passengers due to COVID. Other major transport hubs include Las Américas International Airport in Santo Domingo and Gregorio Luperón International Airport in Puerto Plata. Smaller airports service La Romana, Santiago, and the Samaná peninsula.

Energy

In 2023, the DR generated some 83% of its electricity from fossil fuels, less than 6% from hydroelectric plants, and 10% from other renewable sources like biofuels. With no domestic oil industry, the DR must import all its fossil fuels. The government aims to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and has outlined policies to diversify energy usage and increase renewable energy production in its National Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change (2015-2030). International investment in wind and solar plants has increased in recent years, and several wind energy parks opened in 2019.

Media

The DR's constitution protects freedoms of speech and press, and the government generally respects those rights. Further, observers lauded a 2019 court decision that prison sentences for negative social media comments about political candidates violated constitutional protections of speech. Nevertheless,

journalists are subject to both threats and acts of violence from individuals who object to their reporting, especially regarding drug trafficking and corruption, causing them to self-censor. Further, elected officials often use their positions to threaten and stigmatize journalists. Finally, just a handful of owners control Dominican media outlets, effectively restricting press freedoms.

Print Media: The DR's most widely circulated newspapers include *Listín Diario*, *El Caribe*, *Hoy*, and *El Nuevo Diario*, all Spanish-language publications. While no print newspapers publish in English, online English news sites include DR1 and Dominican Today. Overall, print readership is low, with most Dominicans preferring to access news online.

Radio and TV: Popular in the DR, radio offers a variety of private stations such as *Cadena de Noticias Radio* and *Rumba FM* broadcasting news, talk shows, and salsa and merengue music (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Other popular stations include the Catholic church's *Radio Enriquillo* and *Radio Santa Maria* and government-operated *Corporación Estatal de Radio y Televisión (CERTV)*. Most Dominican TV channels are private, with some regionally-based. Residents also access international radio and TV channels through satellite and cable services.



Telecommunications

The DR has a modern telecommunications infrastructure, although penetration rates are generally lower in rural areas. In 2023, the DR had some 10 landlines and 90 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people.

Internet: Some 84% of Dominicans regularly used the Internet in 2023. Generally, government authorities neither restrict access nor block or censor content, though some observers claim the government monitors some private communications.



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