

Dominican Republic

Country Facts

Population: 9,650,054

Languages: Spanish, English

Predominant Religions: Christian (Roman Catholic, Evangelical)

Time Zone: Four hours behind Greenwich Mean Time

Voltage Requirements: 110 volts. Carry surge protection for voltage irregularities.

Telephone Codes: 809, countrywide area code; 829 is a new area code being phased in primarily for cell-phone and fax numbers, as well as new landline numbers.

Introduction:

What you may notice first about the Dominican Republic is its size. It's a big country with spectacular varied scenery that includes the tallest mountains in the region, unbroken stretches of white sand and the Caribbean's oldest and — some claim — most cosmopolitan city, Santo Domingo.

The Dominican Republic for a long time was one of the Caribbean's more obscure locales; that was before the government began splashing its assets around the world in colorful TV and print advertisements in a determination to elevate the country's name on the list of Caribbean vacation spots. Evidence of their success is visible throughout the country. Visitor numbers have soared, along with new resorts. There have also been more visits by cruise ships to the ports of Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata, Samana and La Romana.

Although the growth in tourism is easing economic troubles in the country, it hasn't ended the desperate conditions experienced by many Dominicans. The unemployment rate is high, and more than a quarter of the people live in poverty, often residing in shantytowns and rural shacks.

Compassion in the Dominican Republic:

Compassion International's work in the Dominican Republic began in 1970. As of 2010 more than 43,180 children participate in more than 170 child development centers. The Child Survival Program serves more than 1,000 mothers or caregivers and their babies, through 16 centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 60 students. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Dominican children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:

- The Dominican Republic has Spanish, French and African influences.
- When male acquaintances meet, they exchange firm handshakes often accompanied with placing the free hand upon the other person's shoulder. Some female acquaintances will kiss each other on both cheeks, but the majority only on one cheek. This same greeting may take place between men and women that have had a long

acquaintanceship. Otherwise, men and women will exchange handshakes. When entering a room, it is customary to greet everyone rather than just a few attendees.

- People in the DR like to share their food with others and tend to be very friendly (don't be surprised if someone walks up to greet you and gives you a kiss on the cheek).
- The Dominican people are also very happy people, they like to talk and laugh.
- The Dominican Republic outranks all other countries in the Caribbean and Central America for producing major-league baseball players.
- Frequent blackouts, sometimes lasting up to 14 hours or more, continue to plague the Dominican Republic. The government may announce them in advance on the radio — sometimes. Many hotel and restaurants maintain their own generators.

Dos and Don'ts:

- Do ask a local resident to teach you to dance merengue. Dominicans take great pride in their music and dance.
- Don't be in a hurry. Dominicans never are.
- Don't get angry or impatient in restaurants if your bill doesn't arrive. It is considered rude to present patrons with the bill until they ask for it.
- Do keep a flashlight handy for power failures.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:

Petty crime (theft, pickpocketing) is the biggest danger most travelers will face, though it isn't particularly widespread except in downtown Santo Domingo. Use common sense and take the usual precautions: avoid unpatrolled beaches after dark and don't leave valuables unattended on the beach or in a rental car. Many parts of Santo Domingo are unsafe, especially at night.

Be aware of your surroundings at night and avoid all dark and lonely areas, even in the heart of Zona Colonial, as well as the Malecon after dark. Secure your wallet or purse. The greatest danger by far is on the roads. The extreme recklessness of some Dominican drivers results in a frightening fatality rate. Avoid *motoconchos* (moped taxis) and communal taxis.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It's a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don't take safety & security for granted.

Health:

Don't drink the tap water. You should even be careful not to let water from the shower get in your mouth. Stick with bottled or boiled drinks, and be careful of any ice that might be in your glass: if you aren't positive that it was made with purified water, don't drink it. Take iodine tablets with you if you expect to visit the countryside where bottled water may be scarce. Hot, freshly cooked food should pose no danger, but avoid any dairy products that might be unpasteurized and wash all fruits with purified water prior to eating them.

Malaria can be a danger in parts of the country, especially near the border with Haiti. Mosquito-transmitted dengue fever is also present. Apply insect repellent, and long pants and closed-toe shoes also are good for extra protection. The parasite that causes schistosomiasis, a disease that can cause fatal liver damage, is present in freshwater lakes and rivers. Microscopic parasitic worms also are present in some areas and can enter your body through the soles of your feet. If you feel your hotel or hostel's hygiene standards may not be the best, protect yourself with sandals in the shower. Rabies is a danger; if you are even nipped by an animal, consult a doctor. AIDS is also a serious problem in the Dominican Republic, where prostitution in several tourist resorts is a thriving industry.

It's wise to bring a doctor's note for any prescription medications you take. Santo Domingo has many U.S.-trained doctors and dentists who speak English. Hospitals and clinics are located throughout the island, though they may be rudimentary. Be sure to bring sunscreen.

We strongly advise you to contact the CDC (www.cdc.gov) or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations. *Hepatitis and typhoid vaccinations may be recommended, as well as anti-malarial medication.*

Money:

Travelers checks may be difficult to cash, except in banks (take your passport); many places won't accept them. Cash advances on credit cards are available in banks, but the process is often very slow (be sure to ask about surcharges for the transaction). ATMs are located throughout the country, but many are often out of order; beware of scams in which "helpful" locals offer to assist you in using an ATM, and then steal your money.

U.S. dollars are widely accepted for most transactions in tourist areas and shops, as are credit cards in most resort areas and cities, although some establishments may levy hefty surcharges if you use a card — ask in advance. Avoid changing money on the black market — the risks are great. (The black marketers are the people shaking wads of cash in various currencies and shouting, "*Cambio!*")

Weather:

November through March, days may be in the 80s F / 28-32 C and nights in the 60s F / 15-22 C. It rains more during May through October, although generally not enough to rule out a visit unless a hurricane is predicted. (Hurricanes are possible in June through November.) The north coast

can get rainy in winter as well. The mountains in the west are considerably cooler, requiring a sweater or jacket during the evening. Constant breezes keep the temperature and humidity fairly tolerable, though Santo Domingo can be extremely muggy in the summer. The southwest desert, while drier, can get hot in daytime.

Dress:

Dress is casual in most of the country. Pack plenty of loose-fitting cotton clothes. If you want to blend in, don't wear shorts in cities. Women who don't cover their shoulders and knees when visiting cathedrals risk being turned away. Like most other Latino societies, the Dominican Republic tends to be modest, and the importance of proper dress cannot be overstated.

All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.

