Haiti

Country Facts
Population: 9,035,536
Languages: French, Creole
Predominant Religions: Voodoo, Christian (Roman Catholic, Protestant)
Time Zone: Five hours behind Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 110 volts
Telephone Code: 509, country code

Introduction:
Anyone visiting Haiti should understand it’s a land where wounds from civil strife remain fresh, with the economy in shambles, poverty and crime on the rise, and its democratic traditions weakened. Residents in the capital city of Port-au-Prince and surrounding area are still struggling to recover from a devastating 7.0-magnitude earthquake that hit in January 2010. More than 220,000 people were killed, more than 300,000 were injured, and more than a million people were left without homes after the quake leveled most of the city. This natural disaster as well as recent hurricanes have left many parts of Haiti in ruins.

Yet Haitians demonstrate a resilience and charm that defy their circumstances. Music, art and the poetic Creole language enrich this island nation. Add to that the inscrutability of Voodoo — an undefined belief system that merges traditional African religion and Catholicism in magic, ceremony and performance art — and you have a rich culture beneath the grime and poverty of daily life. Visitors encounter a tropical atmosphere, open-air markets, some nice beaches and coral reefs, and a beautifully rugged landscape. It’s a place of frequent delays, poor roads, beggars and power outages even at luxury hotels. If you move around, you will encounter evidence of the destitution that afflicts most Haitians.

Compassion in Haiti:
Compassion International’s work in Haiti began in 1968. As of 2010 more than 64,650 children participate in more than 230 child development centers. The Child Survival Program serves more than 2,200 infants, toddlers and mothers or caretakers, through 32 centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 80 students. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Haitian children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
• Haitian values are traditional and conservative. Manners are important in Haitian society and Haitians take pride in knowing that their nation stands alone in surviving a slave rebellion.
• Visitors, commonly called ‘blanc’ (meaning white, in French), should remain sensitive to how they treat Haitians. Greetings are exchanged during even the most commonplace activities, such as entering a hotel. A good morning (bonjour) and good afternoon (bonsoir) are appropriate. “Salut” may be used as a greeting at any time of day.
• Maintain eye contact at all times.
• Haitian people normally greet friends and family by exchanging one or two kisses for females and a handshake and/or hug for males.
• The local custom mandates that kindness goes a long way, especially when asking for directions. If one fails to convey proper greetings with respect and kindness, then one can expect to receive the wrong directions!
• Consideration and warmth will receive a response of enthusiasm and friendship. If one senses hostility, it is more likely a result of a misunderstanding than of an underlying hostility towards ‘blanc’.
• Haitians are, by nature, a more relaxed people who use physical touching, flirting and humor as an important part of social interaction.
• In the countryside, the wealthier peasant may offer coffee or other drinks to the visitor.
• If you sense that someone is trying to get money from you, respond with humor, consideration or indignation as the situation may call for. Foreigners are assumed to be wealthy and, as such, a local may feel it is worth trying to access some of it.
• The Haitian mode of dress is informal, conservative and well-groomed. Comfortable, lightweight, Western-style clothes of cotton and linen fabrics prove most suitable.
• If invited to a meal, expect it to occur around noon. Guests may arrive 10 minutes before or 10 minutes after the invited hour.
• Follow French etiquette at dinner, which normally begins at 6:30 p.m. Hand washing and a 15- to 20-minute period of light drinks and croissants takes place before dinner. The hand washing custom is repeated after dinner when leaving the dining area and coffee with cookies may be served. Etiquette deems that one should stay for one half to one hour after coffee is served. In kind, foreign guests should return favors at a hotel or restaurant.
• In the area of gift exchange, one must use his/her own discretion. Notes or flowers are not required, just a simple, “merci.”
• Major hotels offer creole cuisine and evening events showcasing folkloric groups and Voodoo in the Haitian tradition. Popular culture is made up of folk tales and riddles are used for amusement, of which some are a form of art.
• Legally, women carry the same status as men. Women hold positions in every level of agricultural, social, economic, business and political life. In private industry or service though, women don’t usually reach management positions. However, higher-educated women have held noteworthy posts in both the public and private sectors. For women who do hold managerial positions, their authority is generally respected by men. No one is disappointed if a woman heads an organization for which she is qualified. However, men are more active in the business setting with higher degrees of education.

Dos and Don’ts:
• Don’t expect world-class snorkeling and scuba diving in Haiti. The country’s reefs have been devastated by overfishing.
• Do watch, as you walk down the street, for various Voodoo rites being performed on the sidewalks.
- Don’t forget that gas stations close at dusk.
- Don’t be shocked if you see huge rats scurrying along the sidewalks at night. The capital is infested.

**Travel Tips**

**Personal Safety:**
Since Aristide’s overthrow, crime and civil unrest have remained serious issues in Haiti, and many governments have warned against travel there. Foreigners have been targeted for abductions, and some civil disturbances have turned violent despite the presence of thousands of U.N. peacekeepers. Some roads in the Port-au-Prince area are considered very dangerous. To reduce your chances of being victimized, keep valuables out of sight and keep the doors of your car and accommodations locked. Avoid walking in Port-au-Prince after dark and avoid public transportation.

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:**
Port-au-Prince has four hospitals, but no medical facilities in Haiti are up to the standards of developed countries. Though competent Haitian doctors practice in Port-au-Prince, the equipment is limited. Life-threatening situations may require air-ambulance evacuation to another country. [Make sure your insurance will cover such emergencies.] Clinics can be found in several of the villages, and most hotels have a doctor on call.

The general level of sanitation is low in Haiti, so be careful with food and drink. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be all right [especially if served on an escorted tour or at restaurants in better hotels], but peel fresh fruit and vegetables before eating, choose meat that is well cooked, avoid local dairy products and assume that the tap water is unsafe. [Stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks.]

Ask your physician about anti-malarial medication: Malaria is in all parts of the country. Carry insect repellent. The sun can be strong, so don’t forget sunscreen and a hat.
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.*

**Weather:**
From November to March, day temperatures are in the 70s-80s F / 23-32 C and nights are in the 60s-70s F /15-27 C. The rainy season is May through July, but even when it rains, it usually lasts for only an hour or two in the evening. Hurricane season is July through October. The hill country is always about 10 degrees F / 5 C cooler. Always bring a sweater; evenings can be cool.

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