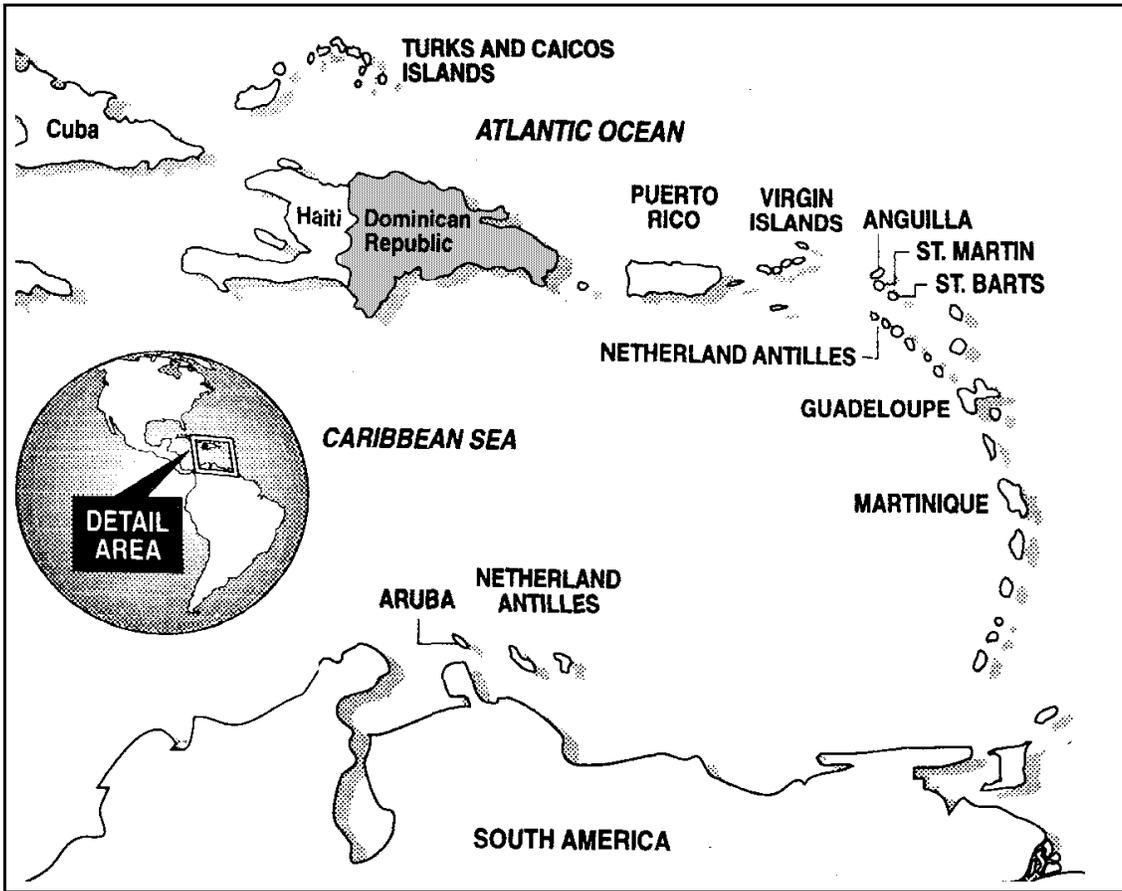


# A Short Course on the Dominican Republic



The internet has many web sites on the DR. Start at [DR1.com](http://DR1.com) and pursue its [links](#). A good friend of mine, sadly deceased, Heinz Meder, has a lively book, *Tales of a Caribbean Isle, By and For an Insider*, with scads of good skinny. Another good friend, Peter Swanson, has an article about Luperón in the August 2002 edition of *PassageMaker* and another in the February 2003 edition of *Cruising World*. The following short course on the DR, my cruising base since 1984, can get you started.



The **Dominican Republic (DR)** covers an area of 18,703 square miles. It occupies the eastern portion of **Hispaniola**, the second largest island of the Antilles. It shares the island with Haiti but the two neighbors have little in common.

## Haiti versus the Dominican Republic

Americans live closer to Hispaniola by both heritage and geography, but they normally get more confused than Europeans as to the differences between that island's two nations. The DR occupies two-thirds of the island with 8 million people, 3 million of them in Santo Domingo. Two million more live in the U.S. Haiti's third of the island has 8 million or more, 3 million of which live in Port au Prince and another 3 million more live overseas. The two peoples differ startlingly and boldly.

The Dominicans talk Spanish. Haitians talk Créole, an extremely corrupted French. Dominicans loosely practice Roman Catholicism. Haitians practice forms of animism more than Catholicism. Dominicans run the gamut of skin color, averaging cinnamon. Haitians come satiny black, with a few mulattos who stay off-island as much as on. Historically the two countries had a bitter rivalry: Haiti invading the DR and terrorizing farmers, the Dominican army slaughtering Haitian immigrants.

A practically impenetrable border further distances the two peoples. It has only two crossing points. The 20 mile swath which alternates between desert in the north and the south, and **Haitises**, or jagged jungle hillocks, in the middle, creates the border that divides the two nations. The terrain either side of the frontier has gone unoccupied through the centuries due to its basic inhospitality to settlement. The inhabitants of Haiti have French and African cultural roots, and live in an overpopulated and poor environment. In contrast, the population of the DR has an Hispanic culture and live in lush and bountiful valleys among forested mountains.

While poor, the DR looks wealthy compared to Haiti, the poorest in the hemisphere. In Haiti you see Dominican businessmen, but in the DR you see only Haitian migrant workers who get dragged back and forth on retired American yellow school busses. Army roadblocks in the western end of the DR search for Haitians smuggling themselves in. With the recent anarchy in Haiti, thousands of Haitians have got papers to live and work in the DR. Haitian labor for gardening and construction comes abundantly and cheaply.

## Land and Climate

The DR has the roughest and most complicated terrain on any of the Caribbean islands. It has four major mountain chains enclosing three large and fruitful valleys running roughly east-west. The north coast, high and rugged, got formed by interaction of the Caribbean and Atlantic tectonic plates. The massive range of the **Cordillera Septentrional** backs up the northern coast. Only narrow coastal plains squeeze between these majestic mountains and the Atlantic Ocean.

The principal mountain system, the **Cordillera Central**, runs across the middle of the country from northern Haiti almost to Santo Domingo. It has more than 20 mountains with heights greater than 6,500 feet, which Cuba boasts as its highest point. These mountains include **Pico Duarte**, the highest peak in the Antilles, at 10,417 feet. The Cordillera Central has a maximum width of 50 miles, and makes up more than one third of the country. Two smaller mountain systems called **Sierra de Neiba** and **Sierra de Baoruco** lie in the southwest. Alluvial plains gently sloping from the southern cordilleras border the south coast. That area produces copious commodities from sugar cane to beef.

Between the Cordillera Septentrional and the Cordillera Central lies the **Cibao Valley**, one of the world's most fertile. It contains areas of flat, particularly fertile land to the east of the city of Santiago in a region called the Vega Real, where bananas, cacao (chocolate), premium tobacco, rice and canned fruits and vegetables produce export income. The **San Juan Valley** lies between the Cordillera Central and the Sierra de Neiba. This valley has excellent soil and, with irrigation, has become a major rice-growing region. Farther to the south, between the Sierra de Neiba and the Sierra de Baoruco, lies the Enriquillo Basin, which has deserts and contains the salt lake **Enriquillo** which lies 130 feet below sea level. The high valley of **Constanza** produces and exports flowers worldwide.

Although at tropical latitudes, the trade winds, the surrounding ocean and high elevations combine in some areas to produce a climate far from typical of the tropics. Frost commonly occurs on the highest peaks of the Cordillera Central. In most areas, however, temperatures vary little from season to season. Rain normally falls the most on mountain slopes over which the easterly trade winds blow. Rainfall decreases on the downwind slopes and in the major valleys.

Its wide variety of topographic and climatic conditions has given the DR the richest plant life in the Caribbean. Native species account for about one third of the nearly 6000 species.



## People

Dominicans, like most peoples, defy statistics. Even among amiable Latin Americans Dominicans command renown for their hospitality, graciousness and dignity. You may easily get to know them individually. Don't hesitate to. Statistically, however, the 8½ million Dominicans have an 85% literacy rate and life expectancy at birth of over 70 years. **Race:** Models of the American race, the population consists of 19% white, 70% mixed African-European-Indian and 11% black. Racial animosities just do not exist. Whites tend to dominate corporations, government and the teeming Dominican gliteratti. **Religion:** The state supported Roman Catholic Church claims the most adherents, but Evangelical and Protestant groups have rapidly grown in the last decades, and the Church's influence has diminished significantly.

Finally, Sammy Sosa, Felipe Alou and others belong to the 10% Dominican makeup of the Major League baseball players in the U.S. Of all the world's states, only California has higher representation in American baseball than the DR.



*GIRL ON A MOTORCYCLE*



*DOMINCAN POT LUCK*



*BEACHES PROTECTED BY REEFS*



*DR Miss World  
CANDIDATES*



*Miss Universe, Amelia Vega*



## Economy

The DR's income comes in roughly equal parts from industry, agriculture and tourism. Small farmers organically grow staples, especially bananas and plantains, yucas, beans, and sweet potatoes. Large exports come from sugar, tobacco and coffee. The DR has 85% of the American sugar import quota. With 56 percent of the country used for crops or pasture, agriculture takes half of the workforce but makes up only one third of the country's earnings. Industry and tourism equally split the other two thirds of the economy, but take respectively a fifth and a third of the labor force. The year 2006 will see 4 million tourist entries, 800,000 of them through the international airport in Puerto Plata, only 20 miles from Luperón

Among the top ten gold producing countries of the world, the DR has the largest single gold mine in the Western Hemisphere. Industrial income comes largely from mining, especially silver, nickel, bauxite, and gold. However, **Zona Francas**, or duty free zones of light manufacturing of products such as clothing, circuit assemblies and jewelry exist in every town of any size. The Dominican Republic is the sixth largest exporter of apparel to the United States in terms of U.S. dollars, trailing Mexico, China, Honduras, Bangladesh and Hong Kong. It ranks the second trading partner of south Florida ports after Brazil. The Zonas Francas contribute nearly half of the industrial export income, and the government heavily promotes an electronics research and manufacturing zone near the capital, Santo Domingo. Remittances from Dominicans working in the U.S. runs over 3 billion dollars a year. Minimum wage runs a paltry US\$500 per month.

The tiny DR holds fourth place in all of Latin America in the race for dollar value of direct foreign investments. The current government team also held power during the second half of the 90s when they brought the DR the highest growth and best currency *in the entire hemisphere*. Their performance to date shows equal promise.

## History and Government

Christopher **Columbus** (real name Cristóbal Colón) discovered the island on December 5, 1492. The native Indians had named their land Quisqueya but Columbus named it Hispaniola ("Little Spain"). The DR became the site of the first European settlements in the New World. Columbus' brother Bartholomew founded **Santo Domingo** in 1496. In 1493, only 8 miles from **Luperón**, they founded the town of **El Castillo**, which became the first surviving settlement of Europeans in the New World. They later evacuated it to Santo Domingo on the south coast. Thus Santo Domingo became the oldest city in the Americas.

An estimated 300,000 natives lived on the island in 1492, but by mid 16th century most had died of epidemics of European diseases, starvation, overwork in the gold mines, and suicide to avoid Spanish persecutions. The gold that their technology could mine gave out by 1530, and Spain lost interest in the colony after they developed the Potasí silver mines in Mexico and Peru. The Spaniards who remained on the island turned to cultivating sugar cane, using black slaves imported from Africa.

In 1697 Spain ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France. By the end of the 18th century, the new French possession known as St. Domingue became one of the world's richest colonies, producing vast quantities of sugar and cotton. The French colony had 524,000 inhabitants, 88 percent African slaves. Santo Domingo, with twice the territory, had less than a fifth of that.

France took control of the whole island in 1795, but slave uprisings in the west led to the creation of Haiti in 1804, the world's first black republic, and only the third republic founded since Rome. In 1814 Spain reluctantly retook control of the eastern two thirds of the island. Dominicans declared independence in 1821, using a translation of the U.S. Constitution. Soon afterward the Haitians invaded the DR and ruled it by terror for 22 years. Hatreds from that period still separate Dominicans from Haitians.

The U.S.-like republic finally got built after General **Gregorio Luperón** mustered an army to expel the Haitians in 1844. During the rest of the 19th century, the Republic suffered more revolutions, more armed invasions from Haiti, and another period of Spanish domination from 1861 to 1865. Corrupt governments borrowed money recklessly, and by 1916 the country lay in political and economic chaos. Germany threatened to occupy the DR in order to make good their debts and, incidentally, use Samaná Bay with their U-boats to close off America's Panama Canal route of resupply to England and France. The United States preempted Germany and occupied the DR with the same excuse, but really to *protect* the approaches to the Panama Canal.

After the Armistice of 1918 the U.S. had difficulty withdrawing from its occupation for lack of an orderly government body to take the reins, and for lack of political will on both sides due to interference of American business interests. A government finally got cobbled together, and the Americans withdrew in 1924. Though opposition to U.S. occupation existed, the enforced political stability permitted major social and economic advances, and began a close U.S.-DR relationship with blood ties.

In 1930 another *coup d'état* put the country into the hands of dictator Rafael Leonidas **Trujillo** Molina, a U.S. trained military strong man. Until his assassination in 1961, Trujillo headed a ruthless police state. At the cost of political freedom, the DR had another period of imposed stability that, combined with favorable sugar prices, stimulated impressive economic growth. Five years of political turmoil after Trujillo's death led in 1965 to another intervention by the U.S., concerned about the possibility of a Cuban-style communist takeover. Not so outlandish an idea, since the DR has turned back invasions from Cuba twice in the last half century. Reid Cabral, acting president at the time and one of only three men left in the government, recounts how he called Lyndon Johnson, while numerous factions skirmished in the Capital's suburbs, and *invited* a police action from the U.S. to pacify the city until the government reorganized. The DR has had relatively orderly and free elections since.

The Dominicans practice politics as do U.S. populations of comparable size such as Chicago, Boston or Philadelphia. In other words, rough and tumble. Nonetheless, the nation has one of the freest citizenries of the world.

## Buying Property in the DR

No restrictions exist on either capital flow in or out of the country, or of foreign ownership of property. The DR uses the same deed and land title system as the Netherlands among many advanced countries, the Catastral, which makes their titles among the safest in the world. Owners under the Catastral system rarely use title insurances, though available.

The key to buying property in the DR: grin and nod and give thanks for all forms of stamped and beribboned documents, including land titles, which sellers and their lawyers may show you. Snap off a few GPS points from the property's corners, then high-tail it to the Tribunal de Tierras. You will find the Puerto Plata provincial office across from the football stadium in Puerto Plata. Give the nice ladies in the Tribunal the appropriate numbers -- just like in the U.S., district, folio, plat, lot, etc. They will then show you the real and only title which exists and the relevant plats from which you can have a copy.

The title looks like a large and stiff version of an American automobile title. The front side describes the property, its position, the present owner(s) and the last price paid for it. On the reverse side you will find two important sections: Restrictions and Liens. You want, of course, no restrictions or limitations on the use of the property, nor should you accept a cent of indebtedness.

Next you grab the owner and stand before the folks in the Tribunal with lots of identification and proof of the purchase. The nice ladies stamp it all up, and give you lots of copies which, remember, do not carry force of law. Only the Catastral has that title. In short, the Catastral system relies on the principle that if one title proves false, nobody has a good one, and not even dictators dare mess with that hornet's nest. It would prove as fatal to them as would raising the price of beer and rum.

## Tourism

### *One of two Luperón resorts*

Since 1970 the government has worked with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to improve the economy by stimulating the tourist industry. Tourists mainly come from the European and Canadian group travel markets, but the sector now wants to address the U.S. market. Only 30% of foreign tourism comes from the United States.

American retirees do live in the DR, however, many having come up from Costa Rica and Mexico. Hundreds of thousands of foreigners travel the country routinely and with safety. Many live in the north coast retirement communities, others have built retreats and ranches throughout the island. Affluent visitors rent cars. Groups travel by bus. The more adventuresome, who want to meet the Dominican people and experience the country close up, simply wander the nation with backpacks, riding dirt bikes or by taking the ubiquitous local transport from mopeds to vans to metro liners.

You can ride the waterfall chutes near Luperón, climb the mountain trails at Pico Duarte, do white water rafting in the mountain rivers of Jarabacoa, or go horseback riding along the local beaches or in the *campos* or hills all around Luperón. Al Meister, creator of the famous Bahama dolphin parks has opened the largest sea encounter in the world just eight miles from Luperón at Cofresí. It includes swimming with sea-lions as well as dolphins plus other adventures.



## Medical Attention in the DR

Early on the DR established free medical training in exchange for years of service at clinics in country towns. After their service many doctors choose to do further training and residency in the United States or Europe, where they hang out their shingle and serve the Latin American population centers there. For decades now, many doctors have come back to the DR with successful U.S. practice behind them. In the DR they can have a better quality of life while maintaining a small practice. You can find specialists practicing in the DR but still on call at major centers in cities such as Houston, New York and Miami.

The outcome of all this? You find public health service clinics everywhere in the DR, and you can get quite reasonable and excellent private care. I have had all my medical needs taken care of in the DR since 1984 without complaint. I have endless horror tales of my experiences while visiting my U.S. homeland, even after qualifying for Medicare!

### Medical Tests

The DR, as in most countries except the U.S., permits its citizens to avail themselves of medical analysis services without the orders of a physician: blood analysis, X-Ray, tomography, Holters, biopsies. You can get standard blood tests in **Luperón**, but **Puerto Plata** and **Santiago** have many more sophisticated and modernly equipped labs (*Laboratorio de Análisis*). Want an MRI? Drop into any of a half dozen modern labs in Santiago for a no-wait session followed by consultation with the radiologist. You carry away his written report *and* the pictures., because, after all, you paid for them. If you must wait a bit, they serve you coffee.

### Prevention

In the DR they have an expression for gastrointestinal disorder: *la turista*. They call it that not because tourists get it, but because tourists *bring* it. Every winter season tourists step off the plane shedding billions of microbes and viruses from the common colds and epidemic flus of the northern cities. The little beasts ramp down onto the tarmac and gambol in the tropic heat. Then the whole island acts as a petri dish for the world's flu cultures. Dominicans, a touchy folk fond of embraces, kissing and handshakes, provide the germs a perfect medium with which to spread. Thus their winter plague: *la turista*.

How can you avoid *la turista* between the tropics? Easy. Do what your mother told you to do, and your Psychology 101 professor made you feel guilty about. Wash your hands and scrub under your nails at every opportunity. Don't poke fingers into any body orifice, including eyes, after shaking hands, handling money or a wet dinghy painter, until you've washed. And *always* eat any meat *well done*. Whatever you do, don't avoid kissing and hugging.