

# Appendix B

## **The Dominican Republic: An Overview**

This overview of the geography, history, culture, and people of the Dominican Republic will help you place the primary source information in each of the modules in context.

### **Geography and the Land**

The Dominican Republic, located in the Caribbean chain of islands between Cuba and Puerto Rico, occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola. The Atlantic Ocean forms its northern coast; the waters of the Caribbean forms its southern shores. The country of Haiti occupies the western third of Hispaniola.

Internationally known for its Spanish ruins, beautiful palm-fringed beaches, and lofty mountain peaks, the Dominican Republic is the second largest nation in the Caribbean, after Cuba. It is only slightly larger than Vermont and New Hampshire and about half the size of Ohio. It lies just 600 miles southeast of Florida and 68 miles east of Puerto Rico.

The Dominican Republic is one of the world's most topographically diverse nations. Its 19,386 square miles comprise more than 20 distinct regions with a remarkable variety of scenery: everything from lush tropical jungles, lowlands and valleys, tall mountain ranges, rivers and lakes, and semi-arid deserts to some of the most agriculturally productive land in the entire Caribbean region.

Santo Domingo, the capital of the country since 1496, is one of the Dominican Republic's four major cities. With a population of 2,411,895, Santo Domingo is a modern city and the seat of national power and administration. It is also the hub of financial and business activity, the home of the country's growing middle class, the site of the largest institution of higher learning, and the center of cultural attractions that include art galleries, libraries, museums, and concert halls.

The country's second largest city, Santiago (population 400,000), is located in the northwest part of the country. It is the Dominican Republic's agricultural center and the heart of the country's tobacco-growing region.

Situated on the southern coast toward the eastern end of the island is the city of La Romana, a provincial capital. La Romana is probably the best example of a medium-sized city that mirrors the changes in the Dominican economy. Once the center of the country's sugar industry, La Romana is an example of the general trend of the Dominican Republic's movement from a sugar-based economy to a more diversified one. Unfortunately, it was devastated in 1998 by Hurricane Georges, and its economic recuperation has been slow.

Puerto Plata, a northern coastal area is the center of the country's booming hotel and resort industry. Puerto Plata has a privately built and publicly run international airport, new roads, water facilities, and sewer systems. Because of the continuing growth of tourism, Puerto Plata's hotels and resorts are a major source of employment for Dominicans.



## **Climate**

The Dominican Republic has a mild, subtropical climate that varies little throughout the year. Temperatures range from 64 degrees to 90 degrees F, and humidity is extremely high. Rainfall is generally moderate, except during the hurricane season. Rains are heaviest in the northeast and in the mountain areas around Santiago, where as much as 100 inches a year may fall. The rest of the country usually enjoys clear, sunny days with only an occasional evening or nighttime shower. The Dominican Republic averages 245 days of sunshine annually.

Hurricanes pose a great threat to the island. Routes and patterns of the hurricanes are unpredictable, but the greatest danger comes in August and September, when hurricanes can last two weeks. The rural areas of the country, with their simple dwellings of mud, thatch, and wood, are particularly vulnerable to the high winds and rain.

In 1998, Hurricane Georges battered the island of Hispaniola, and when the storm finally ended, 500 people in the Dominican Republic were dead or missing, 500 others were seriously injured, and 287,000 were left homeless. In addition, a third of the country's schools were destroyed, and a third were severely damaged. Losses amounted to \$6 billion.



## **History**

Hispaniola was first settled by a group of native South Americans between 3,000 and 4,000 B.C. Nearly 3,000 years later, people from the Arawak tribe of Venezuela came to the island, settling on its eastern tip. More Arawaks arrived over the next centuries, gradually integrating with the original settlers. The original native peoples, who settled on the island and developed an agricultural society, called themselves the Taino (which means good or noble). They used this name to distinguish themselves from the Arawaks.

The Taino society was organized into small villages housing 1,000 to 2,000 people, with a village chief called a *cacique*. The chief could be either male or female. The villages were grouped into regional chiefdoms,

each with its own leader. The Taino had no written language, so little is known about how they lived, other than that they were farmers, cultivating corn, sweet potatoes, beans, squash, cotton, and tobacco. By the time Europeans landed on the island in 1492, there were at least 500,000 inhabitants living in a peaceful and well-organized culture.

The island of Hispaniola has been a center of political struggles since the arrival of Columbus on his first voyage to the West Indies in 1492. Both Spain and France vied for control of the island and its natural resources (gold, silver, coffee, and tobacco) in the 16th and 17th centuries. By the end of the 18th century, Spain ceded to France all rights to one-third of the island, its western portion, which today comprises the Republic of Haiti. The Haitians fought and won against Napoleon's armies, and Haiti became the second European colony (after the United States) to become independent from European colonizers in 1804.

In 1822, Haiti invaded the Spanish-speaking portion of the island to the east and ruled it for 22 years. On February 27, 1844, native revolutionaries in the eastern portion of the island, led by Juan Pablo Duarte, seized Santo Domingo. Independence from Haiti was declared and the Dominican Republic was born. After a brief return to Spanish rule, the republic was restored on August 16, 1861. Both dates—February 27 (Independence Day) and August 16 (Day of the Restoration)—are Dominican national holidays. Duarte is still known today as the “father of the country.”

Today, the Dominican Republic is progressing as a free and democratic nation. A large number of political parties exist, and political speeches and demonstrations take place openly in the main streets. Politicians are able to campaign without being censored, and newspapers provide a relatively free flow of information for the people. On May 16, 2000, Hipolito Mejia was elected president, succeeding President Leonel Fernandez in a smooth transition of power.

The president, who heads the executive branch of the government, is currently elected to a four-year term by direct vote. A bicameral legislature, the National Assembly, is divided into the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. One senator from each of the 26 provinces (and one from the National District of Santo Domingo) is elected by direct vote to a four-year term. The Supreme Court of Justice heads the judicial branch, and all judges serve four-year terms. All citizens 18 years old or older, and those who are under 18 but married, are entitled to vote. Although there are approximately 20 political parties in the Dominican Republic, only three dominate: the Christian Social Reformist Party (CSRFP), the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), and the Dominican Liberation Party (PLD).



## **Population and People**

Dominicans are composed of a unique racial and ethnic mix. There are three main population groups in the country. Mulattos make up about 75 percent of the population; whites and blacks represent 15 percent and 10 percent, respectively. Although the current annual population growth rate is approximately 2.7 percent, the population skyrocketed from 3 million in 1960 to 6.3 million in 1985 and an estimated 8.2 million in 2000.

The Dominican culture reflects the population's diversity. From the Spanish, the Dominicans have inherited their language, food, styles, Catholicism, an extended family united by a patriarch, and a view of human destiny that can be characterized by the phrase, "what will be will be." The roots of the most popular variety of Dominican music, *merengue*, can be traced to African and indigenous Indian cultures. An African influence is also apparent in Dominican folklore, social activities, handicrafts, and cuisine.

The population density is one of the highest in the hemisphere. About 40 percent of the population lives in rural areas in small, scattered communities of from 10 to 200 families. The other 60 percent of the population lives in the urban areas of Santo Domingo, Santiago, and the 28 other provincial capitals. It is estimated that another million Dominicans reside in the United States. The growth of Dominican neighborhoods, such as Washington Heights in New York City, has made a visible impact on the North American urban and cultural scene. Dominicans who emigrate still keep close ties with their relatives in the Dominican Republic, sending them money and material goods on a regular basis.



### **Life in the Countryside**

Approximately 40 percent of the Dominican population still lives in the *campo* (countryside). Many homes owned by *campesinos* (farmers and tenants) are built with traditional materials such as the bark, leaves, and the trunks of the royal palm tree, as well as from stick frames covered with mud. Most lack basic services such as potable drinking water and electricity. A large number of *campesinos* work as tenants. Their wages are low, and poverty and illiteracy are common.

The farmers and peasants who live in the rural areas of the Dominican Republic confront many environmental challenges. In the struggle for arable land, many forests have been decimated. Successive governments have been aware of the needs of the rural poor, and efforts to address these issues continue to be a national priority.



### **The Economy**

Agriculture, particularly the cultivation of sugar cane and the export of sugar, has been one of the mainstays of the Dominican economy. Farmers make up more than a quarter of the labor force. Sugar cane, coffee, cacao and various tropical fruits and vegetables are exported in large quantities, and are also sold in the local markets. Until the early 1980s, sugar accounted for nearly 50 percent of Dominican exports. In 1983, however, the international price of sugar fell to half the cost of production, resulting in an economic crisis. This situation stimulated major efforts at economic diversification, especially in the areas of mining, manufacturing, and tourism.

A growing number of assembly plants in free trade zones has lured foreign manufacturing firms to the Dominican Republic. Plants in these zones currently employ more than 140,000 workers. Manufacturing in these zones contributed over \$520 million to the national balance of payments in 1996, and 1996 annual exports totaled more than \$960 million.

Although mining and manufacturing are important sources of income, tourism still remains the major means of producing national revenue. Tourism has grown dramatically in recent decades, with approximately 1.3 million visitors to the Dominican Republic's resorts today. The nation has more than 25,000 hotel rooms with more under continuous construction. Today, tourism has surpassed sugar cane in importance, and now makes up 13 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP).

According to Wiarda and Kryzanek (1992), the changing character of the economy from predominantly agricultural to more diversified has had a major impact on the country's demography. At the end of the 20th century, more people were living in urban than in rural areas. This trend has substantially increased the number of urban poor in the major cities of the Dominican Republic and placed an increased strain on the national social and economic infrastructure.



## **Education**

Children in the Dominican Republic have access to primary education for 10 years. They are required by law to attend school for six years. The typical school day is three and a half hours. Children study the traditional subjects of mathematics, Spanish, English, science, and history, and often participate in sports such as volleyball, basketball, and baseball.

In the *campos*, children must often walk long distances to get to school. Many rural areas are unable to offer all the necessary grades, and rural schools are in need of qualified teachers. Due to the cost of books and the need for money, some poor children are able to attend school for only a few years. Many parents need their children to care for younger brothers and sisters while they work. Others need their children to help earn family income. Only 70 percent of children between the ages of 7 and 14 actually attend classes, and many children are unable to continue their education past the eighth grade.

About half the nation's children go on to the six-year secondary schools. Of these, about 90 percent take courses that prepare them for college, and 10 percent go on to a vocational or training school. Most Dominican universities are privately owned and expensive. The state university, however, is inexpensive, and an increasing number of students are now attending its regional centers.

## **The Importance of Family, Friends, and Hospitality**

Whether rich or poor, the importance of family to Dominicans cannot be overstated. In the Dominican Republic, family and extended family provide stability in the midst of political upheavals, economic reversals, and natural disasters. The trust, assistance, loyalty, and solidarity that kin owe to one another are important values in Dominican culture. From early childhood, individuals learn that relatives are to be trusted, cared for, and counted on.

Relationships with friends and neighbors are also very important. One Peace Corps Volunteer reported, “The people here really pull together to help out one another. The word ‘neighbor’ seems to mean a great deal more here. People know, care about, and help their neighbors.” Another Volunteer reports that “people are willing to go out of their way to help you. Dominicans have such a richness about them that comes from the value they place on hospitality and relationships.”

Despite the poverty that exists in the *campo*, Peace Corps Volunteers who work there report a certain richness of life that exists among the people. The importance of relationships, friendship, and hospitality is the cultural norm in the *campo*. One visitor remarked that there seems to be an instinctive desire among the Dominicans to connect with people. Peace Corps Volunteers have said that, despite poverty, the *campesinos* always have food and a cup of coffee they are more than willing to share with neighbors and newcomers. They also have an extraordinary willingness to help anyone who may need assistance (whether this be with something as simple as giving directions or more complex, like fixing roofs or moving furniture). One Peace Corps Volunteer noted that “you simply could not get along in life in the *campo* or urban barrios without relying on other people. Helping each other is part of their culture.”



## **Religion**

The constitution of the Dominican Republic gives all citizens freedom of religion. Although most of the country is Roman Catholic, Protestant and folk religions are also widespread. More than 95 percent of the people in the Dominican Republic are Roman Catholic. Every town, large or small, has its Catholic church. The Spanish brought Catholicism from Europe to the island in the early 16th century. In 1540, the cathedral of Santa Maria la Menor was completed in Santo Domingo. Six years later, the first archbishop of the island was appointed.

Peace Corps Volunteers note that religious celebrations are common. For example, each community has a Catholic saint whom it calls its patron saint. Patron saints are thought to protect the community and bring it blessings. Each year, communities across the Dominican Republic celebrate a “Patron Saint’s Week” or the feast of “*Patronales*.” Different communities celebrate their *Patronales* at different set times during the year. One Volunteer reports that *Patronales* is really a nine-day festival, a celebration for the patron saint of the *campo*. “The celebration includes special masses and is a time of community spirit. There are nine nights of musical entertainment, a competition to choose a queen, baseball and softball, speeches, skits, horse races, and lots of dancing every night.”

## **Art and Music**

The Dominican Republic is home to many internationally renowned artists, such as Clara Ledesma, Ada Balcacer, Yoryi Morel, and Jaime Colson. Quite a few Spanish-born painters, such as Jose Vela Zanetti, have become naturalized Dominicans.

Although very little Dominican literature is available in translation or distributed worldwide, a younger generation of Dominican-born authors living in the United States, such as Julia Alvarez (*In the Time of the Butterflies*) and Junot Diaz (*Drown*) are achieving international acclaim. Another celebrated Dominican author is Ramon Aristy, whose novel, *Over*, chronicles the lives of sugar cane cutters in the 1940s.

Music and dance occupy an important place in the culture of the Dominican Republic. Among the most popular and universal dances is the *merengue*. Its appeal cuts across all social levels of the country, and some say it typifies the Dominican spirit. “I’m touched by *merengue*,” Dominican artist Juan Luis Guerra has been quoted as saying, “because it’s the music I have in my heart.” Guerra could be speaking for Dominicans throughout every region of this small, complex, resilient, hospitable, and vibrant island country.







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## Art and Music

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## Additional Resources and Information

Many of the books and albums listed are available for purchase online from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

Students can search the following sites for information on the Dominican Republic and other Central American/Caribbean countries: [expedia.com](http://expedia.com), [about.com](http://about.com), [britannica.com](http://britannica.com).