



INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

By thinking a little about your holiday destination before you travel, and taking some simple steps when you are there, you can gain so much more from your holiday. You will also be making a positive contribution to the people and the places you visit.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The Dominican Republic offers many people their first experience of the Caribbean. Most visitors stay in one of the growing numbers of all-inclusive resorts, although the Dominican Republic is an unexpectedly easy country for independent travel because people are welcoming to foreigners and there is a relatively low crime rate. The country occupies the Eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola. Haiti, one of the world's poorest countries, occupies the western end.

– BE SPARING WITH WATER AND PATIENT WITH SHORTAGES

Try never to waste water. There are water shortages on the island and supplies can suddenly dry up. Water supplies rarely fail in the large hotels – but this can be at the expense of the locals' supplies. Visitors can help conserve water simply by taking showers instead of baths and using towels for more than one day, to reduce laundry.

– BE SPARING WITH ELECTRICITY

As in many developing countries, the power supply in the Dominican Republic is erratic. Many hotels and homes rely on private generating systems as a backup or even as the main supply. The simple action of turning off lights and air conditioning when you leave your room helps conserve electricity, and also protects appliances from being damaged by sudden changes in the electrical power levels.

– SHOP WISELY AND PROTECT ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

Don't buy any souvenirs made from turtle shell, butterflies, coral or mahogany. There are greenback, leatherback and hawksbill turtles around Hispaniola and 151 species of butterfly – 41 of them unique to the island. Many of them are in danger of extinction – as is the fragile coral found around the shores of the island. The mahogany tree is also increasingly endangered and although you may see mahogany products for sale, it is illegal to take anything made from this wood out of the country.

– DON'T ENCOURAGE CRUELTY TO ANIMALS

Be aware that some animal welfare organisations caution against visiting certain animal parks on the island due to their alleged mistreatment of the animals. If you want to find out more about these issues before you go, please refer to the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society website or ask your resort rep for advice once you arrive.

Happily, whale-watching in Samana Bay is strictly regulated by mutual agreement between the boat owners, conservation groups and the Dominican Navy. No vessel allows passengers to swim with the whales.

– ALWAYS ASK FOR PERMISSION BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHING LOCAL PEOPLE

Dominican Republic people are usually very open and receptive to visitors and don't often object to being photographed. Understandably, however, they appreciate being asked first. You might like to offer a gift as a thank you. A personal memento is normally appreciated more than cash.

– HELPING IN A RESPONSIBLE WAY

The Dominican Republic is not a rich country and you will see beggars on the street (often Haitians). Be aware that there are grifters living off disabled beggars by forcing them to beg and taking the proceeds. You may prefer to buy food for a clearly incapacitated beggar instead of giving money. If you want to help the children you see begging, consider donating to a registered charity instead of giving to an individual (see weblinks below). You will be spared the inevitable pleading from other children and your money will be put to more effective use.

– RELAX – YOU'RE ON HOLIDAY

Tourism is developing very quickly but it is still relatively new. So do not expect the same levels of service you find in European holiday resorts. People simply move less quickly because they are working in such heat. It never pays to get impatient when service isn't snappy and instant.



- ENJOY BEING A GRINGO

Get used to hearing *gringo/gringa* and *rubio/rubia* shouted at you. It's not an insult. It's a generic term for a pale-skinned foreigner, not a jibe, and most of the time it's intended as a greeting. A smile is a welcome reply.

- TRY SOME SPANISH

English is becoming widely spoken in the tourist areas but a few words of Spanish, however badly pronounced, are always much appreciated. Speaking to local people is the best way to gain local knowledge and improve your holiday experience.

- DON'T DABBLE IN DRUGS

Drugs are available but the law is severe and the penalty for drug offences is up to 20 years in prison. Foreigners make up 2% of the prison population and as many as 70-80% of prisoners have not stood trial. Prison life in the Dominican Republic is harsh.

- ENJOY SOME LIFE OUTSIDE THE ALL-INCLUSIVES

If your holiday is 'all-inclusive', take the time to eat and drink outside your resort. Most of the country's all-inclusive resorts are owned or part-owned by large multinational chains. Therefore much of the revenue from your holiday is sent out of the country. The wages for workers in the resorts are relatively low and because, understandably, many holidaymakers eat and drink only in their all-inclusive resorts, very little money goes back into the local economy.

Eating and drinking outside the large holiday complexes can be an enjoyable way to learn something about the country as well as helping local people and the country's economy gain some benefit from your visit.

- LOOK FOR SOUVENIRS THAT ARE MADE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

You'll find plenty of souvenirs on sale but it isn't always easy to distinguish between mass-produced generic souvenirs made in other countries and authentic, locally-produced crafts. Making sure your souvenirs were produced on the island helps local people gain some financial benefit from your visit.

- BE SENSITIVE TO THE COUNTRY'S CULTURE

When you are away from the hotel and beaches, avoid very short skirts, shorts and skimpy tops. Local people dress conservatively and find beachwear worn away from the beach and pool offensive. You'll be expected to dress reasonably formally in the cities and, of course, churches and memorial sites. Men in shorts and anyone with bare shoulders are often not allowed to enter many public buildings, including cinemas, churches and some restaurants and historical sites.

- THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF A CHILD UNDER THE AGE OF 18 IS AN INTERNATIONAL CRIME. REPORT ANY SUSPICIOUS INCIDENTS

It is estimated that the Dominican Republic comes third after Brazil and Colombia, as the Latin American country where children are most at risk from sexual exploitation by foreign tourists. One survey* reported 25,400 minors engaged in prostitution. There is now a Dominican government body – part of the attorney general's office – dedicated to prevention, punishment of offenders and rehabilitation of victims. Britons can be prosecuted both abroad and in the UK for sexually abusing a child. If you need to report a suspicious incident talk to your resort rep in confidence. You can also call Crime Stoppers in confidence when you return to the UK on 0800 555 111.

*UNICEF/ONAPLAN mid 1990s

FOR MORE INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

Background reading

The Dominican Republic – Beyond the Lighthouse by James Ferguson (LAB)

Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola By Michelle Wucker (Hill & Wang, 1999/2000)

Muddy Cup: A Dominican Family Comes of age in a New America by Barbara Fischkin (Scribner 1997)

Fiction in English

In the Time of the Butterflies – Julia Alvarez

In the Name of Salome – Julia Alvarez

Drown – Junot Diaz

www.dominicandream.org

Local charity that helps educate poor children

http://www.wwfus.org/buyer beware/caribbean_buyer_beware.pdf

World Wildlife Fund guide to buying Caribbean souvenirs

www.thecode.org

Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism

www.DR1.com

Local online newspaper

www.dominicancooking.com

Local recipes

www.wdcs.org

Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society