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Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic:
History And Sun In The Oldest City Of The Americas



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Soaking Up History And Sun In Santo Domingo

By Kat Kalashian

Santo Domingo, the oldest city in the Americas, has over 500 years of history to offer along with its warm, plentiful sunshine and more than 1,000 miles of azure, Caribbean coastline...

In an intriguing marriage of Old World history and European culture with Latin friendliness and flair, the capital of the Dominican Republic is one of the world's most alluring of oxymorons...

Elegant and noble Spanish colonial architecture soars up to tower robustly over the narrow cobbled streets of the Colonial Zone, shading old men taking dozing siestas on street benches... as women gossip while prepping dinner in the street, shouting to one another from their doorways... as domino players draw vocal crowds for exciting matches... and as kids joke and play as they walk home from school. Lounge music from upscale restaurant patios gives way to bump-bumping bass of merengue and bachata from *colmados* (corner shops) and homes.

At once cosmopolitan and rustic... a city both for business and for fun... a skyline of new glass high-rises and centuries-old stone cathedrals... this city lives as equally in the past as in the present, with a rhythm to life that's as vibrant as it is seductive... as energetic as it is languorous...

And for all this ambience and personality, Santo Domingo is still a modern, metropolitan city...

NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN



Caribbean Sea





The remnants of this city's ancient history pop up throughout the metropolis

When you think of relocating to a Caribbean island, you likely think of lazy lapping waves on sugar-white sands... palm trees, hammocks, dirt roads... the charmingly small collection of local fruits and the simple meals of barbecued fish and chicken you enjoy on holiday. While the Dominican Republic has all these things... they aren't typically enough to keep a person occupied and content for much longer than a two-week vacation.

What you don't typically think of are the realities of day-to-day life: driving on dirt roads every day, wanting high-speed internet when you need a break from the sun, and purchasing more than the basics (and maybe a few familiar comfort foods) when you head to the grocery store or mall.

To actually live on a Caribbean island is a different thing from the vacations you'll inevitably compare it to—those compromises you make while visiting can easily become frustrations in your new life.



Colonial history around every corner

But that's not the case in the Dominican Republic—and certainly not for those relocating to the capital. No (OK...

few) compromises are needed to live here. Enjoy the ease and speed of well-paved roads that crisscross the country... avail of the convenience and familiarity of modern and wide-ranging shopping options both for food and otherwise... all the while still within a stone's throw of that quintessential Caribbean vacation lifestyle.

Aside from the infrastructure the island has to make your new life so easy to adapt to, this is one of the friendliest, most open cultures I've ever experienced. Dominicans are an exceedingly happy, social group of people.

These two pillars support a turnkey move and easy integration for folks thinking about settling in the DR.



The obelisk was erected in 1937 and its paintings (done by several Dominican artists) were added in 1966.

The Friendliest Place On Earth?

Without much personal effort, you'll become instantly pulled into the network of whatever corner of the island

you choose to settle on. When you leave your house, you'll be greeted by the folks on your street, from the veggie and coconut vendors to the security guards (present outside most businesses, apartment buildings, and gated communities). Stop by your local mini-mart, the cashier will recognize you after just a couple trips. Living among neighbors, they're sure to stop you for conversation whenever they see you come and go.

Within a couple weeks of moving in, you're sure to be invited over for more barbecues than you can commit to. Even if just visiting a town, if you strike up a conversation with someone, they're likely to invite you into their home and start preparing some chickens for a soup or grill before you even realize what's going on.

Dominicans are unfailingly hospitable... and, like your favorite grandmother, they live to spoil. They want to offer the best and the best impression they possibly can, no matter who you are.



The historic center is the highlight of the city

Walking around Santo Domingo, you'll be greeted with a friendly smile and wave by every traffic guard, business owner, and dozing security guard you pass. Given half a chance, they'll draw you into a conversation, eager to introduce you to their country and make sure you're having a good experience. When I mentioned to a crossing guard who helped me across the busy Avenida George Washington one afternoon, he was glad to hear I was there to write up Santo Domingo, "That's great—we need that! We love foreigners, they boost the economy and everyone benefits. Please, bring as many newcomers as you can!"

In fact, though, the DR has been so long visited by foreigners that over so many generations of intermarrying, Dominicans don't feel such a divide between themselves and foreigners... there's a unique lack of any "us versus them" bias.

On a related note, this is a great destination for single ladies... I've spoken with many formerly single expat ladies who found love in the DR, one boasting proudly of her "super hunky" husband of nearly 10 years now.

The Oldest City In The Americas

While being the friendliest city in the Americas is debatable, Santo Domingo's age isn't. This was where the Spanish—Columbus himself—first landed in the new World, and this city is home to the first cathedral, first university, first real street, and many other European imports that hadn't existed on this side of the world previously. It is undisputedly the oldest continuously inhabited city in the Americas.

Far from trying to erase its colonial history, Santo Domingo embraces it and capitalizes on it.



Plenty of shady plazas in the historic center...

We at Live and Invest Overseas have been hanging out in cities built by Spain for a long time... Over the past 35 years, we've gotten to know old towns from Granada and Leon, Nicaragua, and Cuenca, Ecuador, to Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, Antigua, Guatemala, and Casco Viejo, Panama.

Established in 1496, Santo Domingo predates them all.

The Mother Of Lands And Languages

The people who inhabited the island of Hispaniola before Europeans arrived were called the Taínos, which meant "the good" in their language.

Their native tongue, also called Taíno, was an Arawakan language and was the most commonly used throughout the Caribbean when the Spanish arrived.

In Taíno, the island was called Quisqueye, meaning "the mother of all lands."

Said to have gone extinct within 100 years of the conquistadors' arrival, Taíno was a major source for borrowed words into European languages, being the first non-European language encountered by the Old World travelers.

Wondering which of our words we owe to the Taíno? You'll recognize plenty...

Taíno	Meaning	English
<i>barbakoa</i>	cooking	frame barbecue
<i>batata</i>	sweet potato	potato
<i>tabako</i>	tobacco	tobacco
<i>hurakã, hodakã</i>	storm	hurricane
<i>hamaka</i>	hammock	hammock
<i>iwana</i>	iguana	iguana
<i>kanowa</i>	boat	canoe
<i>kaniba</i>	cannibal	cannibal
<i>kaya</i>	island	cay(e)
<i>kaimã</i>	crocodile	caiman
<i>kasabi</i>	cassava	cassava
<i>mahis, máhisi</i>	corn	maize
<i>manatí</i>	manatee	manatee
<i>papaya</i>	papaya	papaya
<i>sabana</i>	few trees	savanna
<i>wayaba</i>	guava	guava

Copyright: Wikipedia

It's the oldest European city in the Americas and the capital of Spain's first colony in this part of the world. It's the Caribbean's only medieval Spanish city... but it's also a truly cosmopolitan capital. It has plenty of history and culture, sure, but also diverse dining options, entertainment, and modern shopping along its cobbled streets. In Santo Domingo, you can enjoy theaters, museums, and stadiums (*béisbol* is a national obsession).



Santo Domingo's extensive Zona Colonial, a UNESCO World Heritage site, offers countless Spanish-colonial buildings—interesting prospects for both investment and lifestyle—plus, it hasn't yet become populated with expats like many of the typical colonial city options.

Founded by Christopher Columbus' brother Bartholomew, colonial Santo Domingo might best be described as dignified. It feels more genteel than the cities built in other of Spain's colonies in the decades to follow. The structures at the heart of this old town are classic Spanish colonial but simpler, statelier, and somehow more refined than their counterparts across the region.

Calle Las Damas, the first street of the original city and therefore the oldest street in all the Americas, is lined with 16th-century pale stone facades and runs into Plaza de España, the expansive open square at the harbor.

The highlight here is the colonial city's first palace, the private home of the first governor of the colony, Diego Columbus, Christopher's son. It's an exceptional example of classic Spanish-colonial architecture.

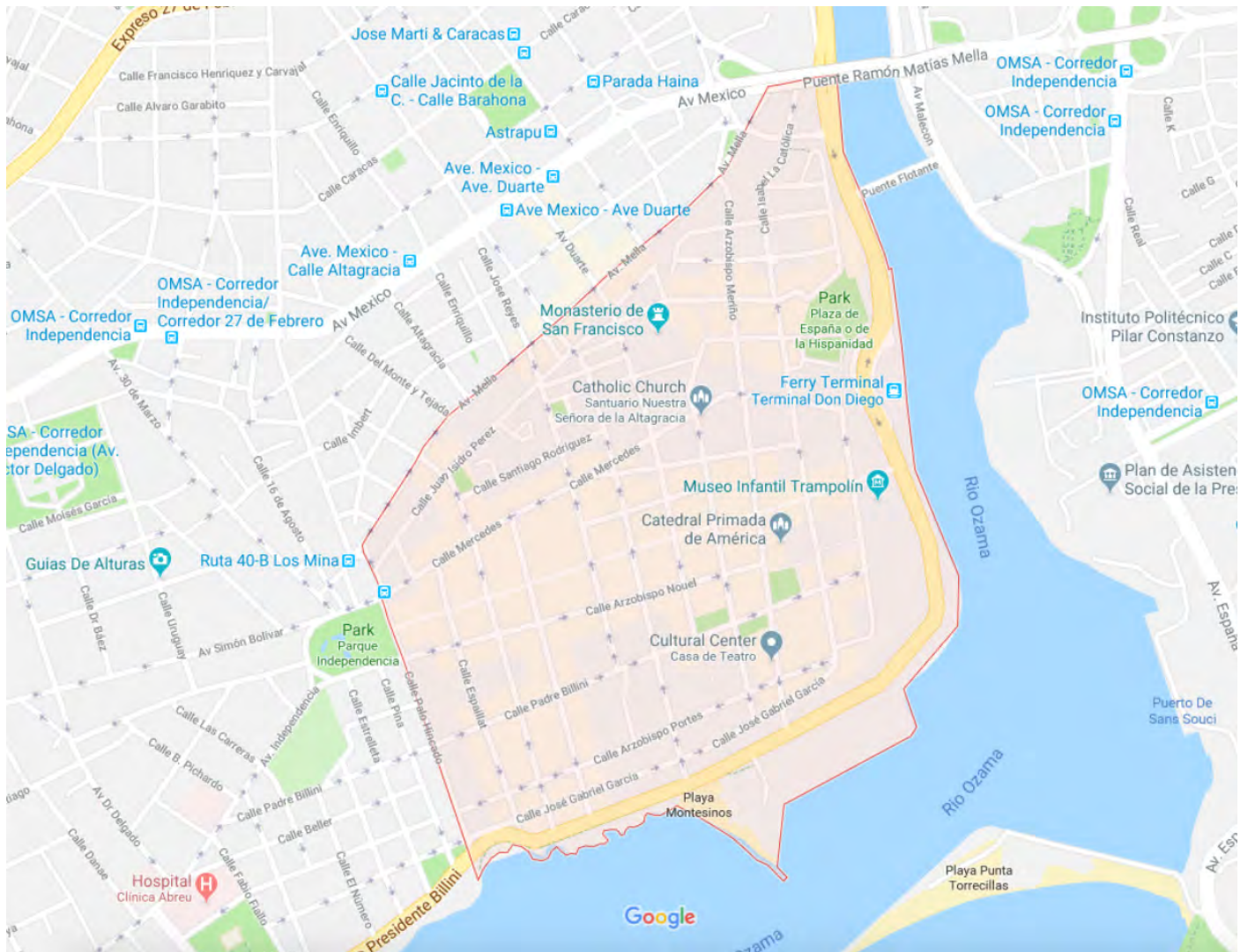
Diego's vice-regal residence marks one edge of the Plaza de España, at the water. At the square's other edge, alongside the old town, is a row of restaurants where you can dine *al fresco* and watch modern-day activity in this harbor that helped build the Americas.



In colonial Santo Domingo, Bartholomew and Diego created an administrative hub for the activities their sponsoring country imagined for the New World they envisioned. It was from this base that the Spanish managed their conquests of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guatemala, Peru, Florida, Colombia, and Jamaica.

In colonial Santo Domingo, the Columbuses built a customs house, a hospital, a cathedral, a university, a library... everything required to launch a new Spain.

During its golden age, this city's colonial structures stood as testament to the riches flowing through their benefactors' coffers.

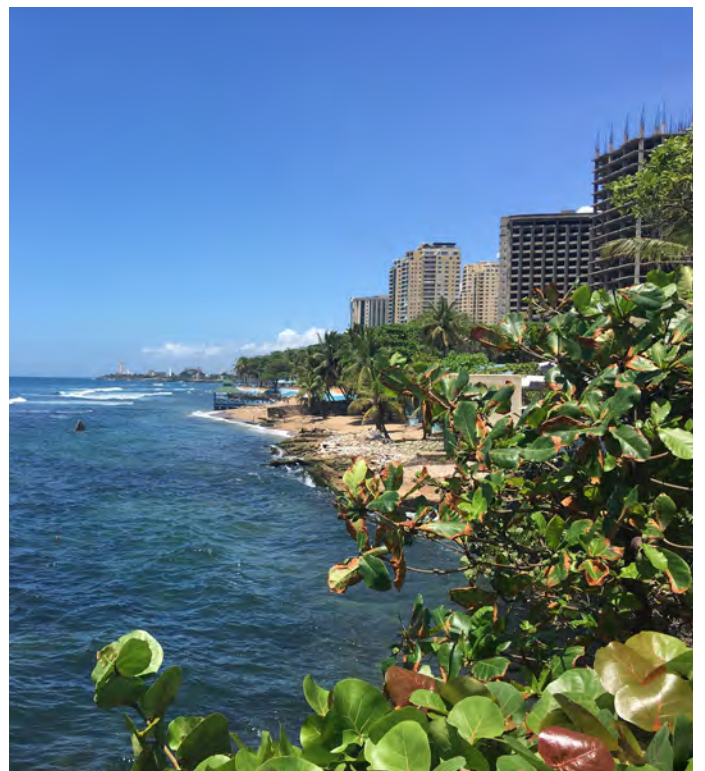


The Lively Coastline—*El Malecón*

One edge of the Zona Colonial is bordered by Río Ozama, with Calle de las Damas running parallel to the river, another by the open Caribbean. While you'll still see old buildings on the Caribbean side, this is where things begin to give way to the modern, with new, mid-rise hotels and casinos punctuating the coastline all the way from down Avenida George Washington, locally referred to as *el Malecón* (the boardwalk).

While the heart of the Colonial Zone is slow-moving and genteel, the *malecón* is a riot of activity. During holiday seasons (*carnaval*, New Year's... and pretty much every weekend), this strip turns into a giant outdoor nightclub—even during the day. On an average evening, it's the most interesting and happening place to be.

From the turning point where the river feeds into the sea and down the coast to Avenida Abraham Lincoln, the





El malecón

coastline is a buzzing, energetic strip, popular among locals and foreigners alike. From kids and teens riding bikes and boards to families and tourists out on walks along with the health-conscious jogging back and forth, this pleasant pedestrianized byway is one of the most popular (and beautiful) hangouts in the city.



Snack bars and playgrounds aplenty...



The most enchanting part of the stretch, though, is the coast itself. Depending on the topography, waves might lap onto sand or crash into rocks—and in the rocky parts you might be treated to a refreshing sea spray as you pass, as water gushes up through tunnels and crags.



A mini gusher

Take a stroll down one of the stairways that lead down from the “boardwalk” to the beach and watch the folks that swim or snorkel right here off the city. (While the water is said to be clean enough due to a high salinity, I wouldn’t personally swim this close to a major industrial hub.) Or take advantage of the little docks and pavilions peppered along the water... these are where lovers meet for trysts, where folks spend hours fishing or crabbing, where the youth takes their selfies, and where retired couples promenade in the evening.



One of many over-water pavilions



A fishing pier

Plenty of ice cream and pizza stands dot the way, along with playgrounds, outdoor workout areas, playing courts, pavilions, and artistic graffiti that liven up the route. If you're in the mood for a sit-down meal, you'll find several excellent local joints at which to take a load off. Adrian's is a well-loved favorite, with its balconies that hang over the beach and its excellent but low-key (and low-cost) dishes. You'll also stumble on outdoor seafood restaurants and grills right on the water, but these are all of the same casual ilk. For something a little more upscale, don't shy away from the restaurants on the other side of Avenida George Washington—they may not hang over the sea, but they do serve excellent dishes in a fancier, indoor setting. Mostly associated with the hotels or casinos, expect to pay tourist prices if you opt for the more genteel side of the street.



Adrian's

Dominican Street Art

The *malecón* is a legalized graffiti zone, where artists are invited to come and make their mark on a stretch of wall along Avenida George Washington.









Beyond The Original Walls...

There's a lot more to the city than just the Zona Colonial. Other neighborhoods of note include Gascue, Naco, Piantini, Paraíso, Evaristo Morales, Arroyo Hondo, Bella Vista, and Mirador Sur.

Gascue is the beginning of the modern as you make your way out of the old city. Much of this area is waterfront, the *malecón*, with the Colonial Zone on its eastern border. This is the best compromise if you're looking for new construction (and possibly on the water) but still want to enjoy the charms of the old town.

From Gascue, neighborhoods only get more commercial and chaotic. Once you get into central Santo Domingo, buildings become new and mid- to high-rise, sprawling malls and large chain hotels line the byways, and construction is ubiquitous.

Piantini... This is the heart of the business district, but it's becoming one of the trendier new residential neighborhoods. You'll find an increasing number of boutique and luxury hotels, restaurants, and stores here, including some of the city's premier new residential developments (mostly in the form of mid-rise condo buildings).

This part of town is now earmarked for further and ongoing changes, with developers buying out homes, businesses, and lots in order to construct their new towers. This might not be an ideal situation for those living there in the near-term—it means construction is unceasing for the time being. However, if you're looking to purchase, this is the up-and-coming place to place your bets and park your money.

While a plethora of entertainment options are available here, including IMAX and 3D movie theaters, the best malls, and some of the city's most upscale dining (much of it within walking distance), you're a good distance from the waterfront and the Zona Colonial.

Mirador Sur was another part of the city that really stood out for me, comparable to the Upper East Side—both in atmosphere and price. Mirador Sur is the commonly used name for Núñez de Cáceres Park, a narrow strip of parkland that runs parallel to the ocean just a few blocks back—narrow in one direction but sprawling for blocks in the other. All along this park are some of the most

high-end luxury condo buildings in the city; it's Santo Domingo's 5th Avenue or Central Park West.

Bella Vista is just north of this area and comparable in ambience but not park-adjacent. Again, this is a homey-feeling residential area with lots of great restaurants and bars.

Of all the residential zones in this city, the neighborhoods I found most appealing were: the Colonial Zone, Gascue, Mirador Sur, and Piantini (in that order).

Getting Around In Santo Domingo

Hopefully you don't have far to go... because getting around this city beyond your immediate neighborhood isn't the easiest (or cheapest).

The streets in and around town are paved and in fairly good condition; sidewalks are another story... They are typically in disrepair and not maintained. Santo Domingo expat Charles Fritz adds, "I jog 5 miles per day, and have to be very careful here. Repairs are not quickly done." In the Colonial Zone, you can rent a bike at Zona Bici to



Ice cream trucks (or bikes) still work these streets...

tour the old city, but you won't get far by bike in the rest of the city (apart from within parks or on the *malecón*).

The city's metro is the second oldest metro system in the Caribbean and Central America, as well as the most extensive by both length and number of stations. It's clean, fast, and safe. Unfortunately, it only goes in two directions, running parallel to the two most used

thoroughfares: Avenida Máximo Gómez and Expreso Kennedy, so it's not hugely useful unless you're a commuter. Open from 6 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. weekdays (closing at 10 p.m. on weekends), a ticket costs 20 pesos or you could get a rechargeable card for 60 pesos (plus a minimum of five trips, i.e., 100 pesos).

Buses are a great option for getting out of the city, with three private lines (with clean and modern vehicles, even including a movie as entertainment on long rides) running from the capital to all the popular beaches daily. Tickets to Puerto Plata, for example cost about 500 pesos.

However, I wouldn't recommend buses for inner-city travel unless you're fluent in Spanish and up for an adventure. As in most Latin countries, routes, maps, and pickup times are vague at best.



For a true taste of Dominican transport, try a *guagua*, a privately owned truck or van used to shuttle folks around. (Again, I recommend this only if you're confident in Spanish.) They're found all over the country and are typically reliable—in smaller towns they serve as primary public transport. To catch one, simply stand on the road and flag it down. There will be a sign in the window to say its final destination. If you're not sure about its destination, just ask if they're going in your direction. Tell them where you're going and ask them to alert you when you should get out. While these are a fun experience and might sometimes be convenient, they are typically uncomfortable, with a dozen people crammed into the back with no air conditioning and poor vehicle condition.

If your destination isn't on the metro line or a bus/*guagua* route, you'll have to drive. While life in the city would be

easier and cheaper if you don't own a car, you're likely to want one for convenience in the city and freedom of movement around the country. I recommend getting settled for at least a few months before committing to a car here, you might find that you get by fine without one. You could certainly survive in the city without one (and it would also reduce your cost of living), and you can simply use buses or rent a car when you want to head out of the city.

To avoid a personal car, you can make use of the taxis in Santo Domingo, which are always labeled for tourists. They aren't metered and you'll definitely be charged a gringo premium, but they are safe and convenient, although the cars are likely to be in poor condition if flagged off the street. For a better taxi you can call a company or get one from a hotel, but you'll be charged higher fees (ridiculous fees from hotels). Apollo Taxi is the preferred company of most in the city. Typically, a cab ride within the city shouldn't cost more than 100 pesos.

A better overall option is to use a ride-hailing service. Santo Domingo is serviced by Uber and Cabify, both of which are credit-card only services that you'd use through a smartphone. There's also an e-taxi service that you'd order by WhatsApp (another smartphone application, this one for free calls and texts) or through their website—this one is cash only but uses fixed rates based on zones.

Another very Dominican vehicle is the *motoconcho*, or moto taxi—you can even order an Uber moto. While they are liberally used by locals, they are not safe and no insurance will cover injury sustained in a moto taxi accident.



it may also be tempting to buy a motorcycle, as they are reasonably priced and everybody has one... but it's unsafe. Moto drivers are not required to wear a helmet or have a driver's license, and you don't have to be 18 years old. It is a free for all, to say the least.



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Familiar Names Mark The Way

As soon as you start navigating Santo Domingo, you'll see the familiar names throughout the city—making it easy to become oriented. For obvious reasons, most Latin American cities name their roads in Spanish (whether actual names or just numbered streets), adding another hurdle for a non-Spanish-speaker to get accustomed to their surroundings.

Here, remembering street names is easy, and they make for convenient landmarks. Some of the main avenues in the city are named after well-loved U.S. presidents, others after famous world leaders, folk heroes, and poets.

Robert F. Kennedy graces the main east-west highway within the city, he being especially appreciated in the country for his Alliance for Progress initiative to promote economic ties between the States and Latin America. Visit a provincial clinic in the country, and it's likely to bear a plaque attesting to its creation by the Alliance for Progress.

Abraham Lincoln is another favorite here thanks to his emancipation efforts, and his north-south running street marks the end of the *malecón*. Avenida George

Washington, the *malecón* itself, runs from the Zona Colonial down along the coastline.

From Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill to Simón Bolívar, globally famous names are not unknown to this city, whether they hail from the region or not.

Many were named by President/Dictator Rafael Trujillo (in power from 1930 to 1961), who trained with the Marine Corps, the skills from which he later employed to help him gain his power in the DR (giving him a unique connection to the United States and its most famous leaders).

When the city was devastated by a hurricane in 1930, Trujillo had the chance to rebuild—much of it due to foreign funding—and thus reorganize the city to his liking (including naming).

Some say his name choices were made to curry favor with world leaders, others that it was merely in acknowledgement of their donations to the welfare of the city... and, as he and his position of authority owed a good deal to the U.S. Marine Corps, the use of American names does seem to make sense.

With the airport about 30 minutes from the city center, and several direct flights to the United States, getting in and out of the DR is easy from the capital. At just an hour-and-a-half from Miami, it's a close hop to be back in the States.

Las Américas International Airport (SDQ)	
Direct Flights From The United States From:	Florida, Atlanta, New York, Boston, Philadelphia
Direct Flights From Canada:	Air Transat (Montréal, Toronto)
Other Direct Flights:	AeroMexico (Mexico City), Air Antilles Express, Air Caraïbes, Air France (France), Air Europa, Iberia, Turpial Airlines, Wamos Air (Spain), Air Turks and Caicos (Jamaica), Avianca (Colombia), Aserca Airlines, LASER, Venezolana (Venezuela), LIAT (Caribbean), Caicos Express Airways (Turks and Caicos), Condor, Eurowings (Germany, Costa Rica, Panama), Copa (Panama), Cubana (Cuba), Fly All Ways, InterCaribbean Airways, PAWA Dominicana, Sky High Aviation Services, Winair (Caribbean), Insel Air (Caribbean), TUI fly Belgium (Belgium), Seaborne (Puerto Rico)
Domestic Carriers:	Aerodomca, Aeronaves Dominicanas, Air Century, Air Inter Island, Dominican Wings, PAWA Dominicana, Servicios Aéreos Profesionales

A Tropical Climate

While this is a consistently hot and humid part of the world, thanks to coastal breezes, Santo Domingo stays pretty comfortable. Overall, the humidity is much less in the DR than in regional neighbors (Panama, for example).

The average annual temperature is just under 80°F (26° C), with humidity hovering around 84%, and variations from those averages are determined more by altitude than anything else. From May to October it's hot and stuffy, but from November to March it gets a little cooler in the city just based on wind patterns.

The DR experiences wet and dry seasons, as opposed to winter and summer... but these seasons vary according to coast. For the southern coast, rain is heavier from May to November, and you'll get plenty of it—nearly 80 inches on average over the course of the year. Fortunately, the rains are often more prevalent at night, and the daytime showers usually dissipate quickly.

The DR—A Country On The Move

The Dominican Republic has a fast-growing economy. The country has enjoyed growth rates of about 7% per year, thanks largely to millions of tourism dollars from North American and European travelers flocking to those sandy beaches and luxury resorts in growing numbers.

The DR government is stable and conservative in its management of the country. Alongside economic growth, former President Danilo Medina made education a priority for his term, sponsoring literacy and vocational training programs for adults and building thousands of new schools during his years in office.

“Medina’s administration worked hard to get this country beyond developing-world status,” one local businessman I spent time with told me.

The country’s infrastructure has improved dramatically in the last decade. Today new highways connect most



A typical cityscape: moto taxis, fruit and coconut vendors, and families shopping the street stalls

But What About The Hurricanes?

Hurricanes are a regional threat not to be ignored—the Dominican Republic is squarely in the hurricane belt—but you'd be surprised just how safe the country typically is from them.

The Atlantic hurricane season runs from the beginning of June to the end of November, and the DR is aware and well-prepared for the chance of a hurricane or a tropical storm arriving each year.

In fact, this island in general is protected from hurricanes, which are not common here. The Dominican Republic has been hit by only 13 hurricanes in the past 80 years. It is naturally protected by Puerto Rico, and the Mona Channel helps to reduce risk by creating a pressure system that pushes storms out to sea. The mountainous topography quickly redirects any high-speed winds that might come close, often turning any big storm into heavy rains at most.

But it's not a threat the island takes lightly. Concrete homes are built to be quake- and hurricane-proof, and the quality of modern construction is high.

These days it's easier than ever to predict fallout—with the wealth of data online, everyone can see as soon as a tropical wave has left the west coast of Africa and is on its way across the ocean. Dominicans can see a storm or a hurricane when it is a week away and track it to predict whether it will come to the island or not, as well as which parts of the island might be affected.

In 2017, hurricanes Irma and Maria were both due to pass straight along the north of the island. However, until they actually arrived, it was hard to know if the eye would be offshore or a direct hit all along the north coast.

The island began preparations a few days before it was due to arrive in each case. For civilians, this means buying candles and flashlights . . . ensuring there is enough gasoline for generators and that inverter batteries are topped up. It's also wise to prepare for water outages with five-gallon bottles of drinking water and filling buckets and containers for household use.

DR expat Lindsay de Feliz explains, "We know to keep all cell phones, laptops, and tablets fully charged. The country turns off the electricity as a storm passes through so that loose wires do not electrocute people or cause fires. As we are used to frequent cuts, many people have backup systems in place."

Irma, a Category 5 event, saw electrical outages, especially along the northern coast, but that was about it.

Maria, only a Category 3, was a different story. Moving slower, the island experienced longer bouts of wind and rain, which resulted in flooding—the worst consequence for most of the country. Our attorney in Santo Domingo reported to us: "There was a lot of rain, which is what hurricanes usually turn to when they enter the DR or come close to it. Damage was caused by flooding in the coastal areas, and crops were washed out leading to increased grain prices in the following months.

"The North Coast got some flooding, so traffic was interrupted for a couple of days until the waters drained. People living by the river edge—which is illegal but common in rural areas—experienced damage and fatalities due to rivers overflowing—which is why it's illegal to live near them.

"However, in the capital, as was the case with most of the country, we hardly felt the effect—just intermittent rain and some wind.

"In fact, I was hoping for a day or two off, thanks to the hurricane . . . wasn't that wishful thinking! Business continued as usual here, without a blip in internet service or electrical coverage.

"For the most part, the country came through her recent storms unscathed."

Lindsay concludes: "Yes, the Dominican Republic gets hurricanes, but this island is used to getting hurricanes. Dominicans know how to prepare and how to recover... and make sure we expats know what to do, too."

Santo Domingo expat Charles Fritz adds some perspective: "Being from Charleston, South Carolina, I can tell you the flooding here is not that different from low-lying American coastal cities."

of the resort and beach areas. The colonial zone in Santo Domingo is enjoying a face-lift. New roads and sidewalks are being built, and utility cables are being buried underground.



The oldest church in the Americas

More flights from the United States make the island more accessible, and major international hotel chains are targeting the DR, specifically Santo Domingo, for new properties. Recently opened big-name brands include a JW Marriott, an Embassy Suites by Hilton, an Intercontinental, and a Hard Rock Hotel.

Meantime, Carnival is bringing a ship a day to Santo Domingo's cruise dock.

The DR has seen over 6 million tourists per year over the last few and about 60% of these are from North America. The government is trying to attract more Chinese tourists and has also targeted Israel with success, with charters arriving regularly from that country (under normal travel conditions). The country now receives more tourists than any other Caribbean destination.

Tourism is up. Poverty is down.



Santo Domingo's many plazas are popular hangouts for all types... see kids on playgrounds, men playing dominos, and women chatting or sewing while they enjoy the plentiful sunshine

Beyond tourism, the Dominican Republic's economy relies on agriculture (bananas, coffee, and cocoa) and mining.

The Dominican Republic is a country on the move... a market to get into. GDP growth has averaged 7% per year since 2014, and inflation is low, ranging from less than 1% to 3%.

Of course, this is still a developing country. From an investor's point of view, that means plenty of unrealized upside... Real estate prices are low. Rental yields are high. Business opportunities abound—especially in the tourist areas.

Currency Gain

The Dominican Republic uses the Dominican peso. [Go here to see today's exchange rate.](#)

If you take a look at the 10-year chart of the DR pesos against the dollar, you see a slow and steady depreciation of the peso. This is one place where your dollars are strong and stronger every year.

Modern Conveniences

As I said, you really don't need to make any concessions in the DR, especially in Santo Domingo.

Services are good, with cable, internet, and phone services cheap and reliable. The Wi-Fi is fast enough to support Skype calls and video streaming.

Like all developing-world cities, the streets of Santo Domingo are overhung and crisscrossed by masses and knots of ugly electrical cables, which are now being put underground. It can seem a small thing, but it's the kind of thing that makes a big difference in the overall impression of a place.

One issue the country still struggles greatly with is reliable power and water, but these are less of an issue in Santo Domingo than anywhere else in the country. You might experience brief electrical outages in the capital, but they are generally short-lived.



A Power Struggle...

Electricity in the DR is segregated by region, with four levels representing the hours of available power for that grid. A means you've got 24 hours of electricity per day, D means you've got a mere 8 or less...

While anyplace you'd want to live in Santo Domingo is on the A grid, this is still something to be aware of.

Shopping—You'll Be Pleasantly Surprised...

Most people think of living on a Caribbean island and assume they'll have to make some compromises on availability and costs of goods... and while that's true to an extent, I'd bet you'll be pleased by the options you have here, despite the importation hurdle.

Thanks to all the expats that have been here before you, there's already a decent market for imported goods. I was amazed that I can find things on the shelves here that have long been sacred "U.S.-only items" to me for years now. Living in Panama—well-populated by U.S. expats for over a century—I thought I had the best of American imports at my fingertips... but I found things here that I've never seen in Panama. Now, this is a little embarrassing—these are not highbrow items that I'm proud to admit to purchasing if I have the chance... things like cans of Chef-Boy-R-Dee, and boxes of cake batter or Hamburger Helper. Yes, you pay plenty extra for them, but they're here when you need a dose of bad-for-you comfort food or a taste of something familiar.



Sticking to local ingredients, though, your shopping basket will be mercifully easy on the wallet. Aside from grocery stores, give produce markets and street vendors a chance. Here you can haggle for all your worth and, once you have a regular guy, you can count on good prices for fresh, straight-from-the-farm goods without any hassle.



Spices, herbs, loofahs... pesticide, books, and passports (or hopefully their covers?)... It's not just fruit you'll find when you shop the street vendors



It may not be the most elegant setting, but don't discount the street vendors—you never know where you'll find the best banana!

When it comes to clothing and household items, there's a clear tradeoff of price against quality. Dominican-made products are cheap, but they don't last. Expect for that locally made dining set to be a stop-gap and buy that cute sundress knowing it'll have a short life in your closet... or else pass them up for sturdier brands that you know are worth the import premium.



Despite the aspirational name, this is the kind of place you'd find super-cheap local goods (don't expect them to last long)

Haggle For Your Life!

Haggling is an integral part of most shopping in the DR.

Even if you're in a real store and the item has a price tag, you're likely to be able to haggle—especially in touristy stores. If there are no prices, you can be sure they'll charge whatever they think they can gouge you for.

It's best to try to talk it out before they start tallying goods, but if you are hit with sticker shock when they announce the final bill, don't hesitate to open negotiations. If they won't back down, just leave and hit the next tourist gift shop... it's not like there's a shortage!

This isn't true, of course, for chains or corporate business... but any boutique or mom-and-pop shop will likely give you a better price if you ask.

If the price they offer is continually too high, you'll eventually hear those magic words: "What can you pay?" ("*¿Qué puedes hacer?*" or "*¿Qué puedes pagar?*") Name your price. If it's not enough for them, they'll tell you. From there, though, you have a good idea of what the middle ground should be.

Cost Of Living

A couple's basic monthly budget here should come to about 63,500 pesos if you own your home. If not, factor in another 50,000 or so for rent, putting your budget at about 107,000 pesos. If your goal is to live as cheaply as possible (but you still have to rent), you could cut your budget down to about 75,000 a month. [Go here to see today's exchange rate.](#)

That budget would allow you to live well without having to watch your pennies as you might back home. With a budget of US\$2,000, you could afford more entertainment and extra household help, for example, and really enjoy the good life.

Invest in a place of your own, and your monthly living costs would be much, much less. This is a realistic and appealing option, as property prices in this country are a bargain, certainly relative to elsewhere in the Caribbean. You could buy an apartment for as little as US\$100,000 or even less. Construction costs are also low for the region at about US\$2,000 per square meter.

This level of cost of living is unheard of for the Caribbean. A 2016 survey by TravelMag.com named Santo Domingo as the cheapest among 30 destinations in the Caribbean. With findings based on the cheapest double room with a minimum of three stars, a night in the capital city of the Dominican Republic costs from US\$48... while at the other end of the spectrum, St. Barts starts at US\$324. The same Caribbean sun, white sands, and turquoise waters... at more than six times the price!



Santo Domingo expat Charles Fritz adds, “For only US\$660 per month, we have a huge three-bedroom, four-and-a-half-bath seventh-floor apartment with beautiful marble floors, crown molding, and wonderful woodwork, as well as a balcony view of the Caribbean.

“We enjoy the sea breezes from our balcony, resting on our comfortable Dominican-made rocking chairs, every day. These breezes are not only a great pleasure but also have allowed us to use air-conditioning only at night in

our bedroom. This helps to keep our electricity cost down; our bill is between US\$40 and US\$60 a month.

“And we have no need for a car, as public transportation and taxi services are readily available and quite affordable.”

While it’s possible to live here cheap, it’s also easy to spend more for luxury if you want to. I compared costs of restaurants across the city, ranging from mid-range local to super upscale.

	Restaurante Tipico Bonao	Adrian’s (Gascue)	Lulu’s (Zona Colonial)	Cassino (Piantini)
Appetizer	RD\$ 194	RD\$ 219	RD\$ 452	RD\$ 523
Salad	RD\$ 273	RD\$ 257	-	RD\$ 578
Soup	RD\$ 460	RD\$ 292	RD\$ 295	RD\$ 378
Tapas-style plate	-	RD\$ 280	RD\$ 540	RD\$ 483
Main course	RD\$ 464	RD\$ 442	-	RD\$ 1088
Seafood dish	RD\$ 565	RD\$ 614	-	RD\$ 1,051
Sandwich	-	RD\$ 269	RD\$ 375	-
Dessert	RD\$ 144	RD\$ 109	-	-
Cocktail	-	RD\$ 191	RD\$ 350	RD\$ 500
Beer	RD\$ 134	RD\$ 134	-	RD\$ 200
Coffee	RD\$ 103	RD\$ 100	RD\$ 150	RD\$ 200

As you see, you can easily scrounge or splurge in Santo Domingo, according to your tastes (and your wallet)

Restaurante Tipico Bonao is an off-the-beaten-track, patio-style grill serving traditional dishes. The food is excellent, but it’s an outdoor restaurant in plain setting and the location is out of the way.



Grilled lamb and moro de guandules (pigeon peas and rice)



Stewed goat and patacones



Rabbit stew and moro de guandules (pigeon peas and rice)



A side of plátanos maduros and fresh avocado—not to be missed!

Adrian's is right on the main drag of Avenida George Washington in Gascue, with dining balconies hanging over the oceanfront as well as indoor tables. While it also serves local fare, its location and atmosphere are top-notch.



Adrian's

Finally, Cassino represents the best of the best. White-jacketed waiters serving the most exquisitely contrived dishes in a setting that you'd easily mistake for being in Manhattan or Paris. The roof retracts to reveal the sky in good weather, the main dining room's chandelier hanging below the open sky...



Retracting...

Lulu's is a tapas bar in the heart of the Zona Colonial, on the plaza right behind the Basilica Cathedral, serving creative dishes and cocktails as eclectic as they are delicious. It's trendy and upscale, but it's also a walk-in-style place that doesn't demand formality—no white tablecloths here.



The view from a patio seat at Lulu's...



Fully open



An enchanting pathway to the inner outdoor courtyard...



Salmon fillet over polenta



Shrimp and chorizo croqueta appetizers



Pasta cacio e pepe in a parmesan nest

Hablando...

Learning Spanish will certainly increase your quality of living, and we recommend learning the local language no matter where you want to live, but it's not an absolute necessity living in Santo Domingo.



This capital city is home to many well-educated Dominicans doing business, plus a thriving service industry that often caters to tourists. If you don't wander far from the mainstream hangouts, you'll be fine getting by in English. And if you really get stuck, there's almost always someone nearby to help with translation issues.

Once you wander into more local establishments, those not intended for tourists, you'll need Spanish. This is also

the case for taking public transport other than taxis or ride-hailing, as well as for haggling with vendors—you'll never get the lowest price if you're negotiating in English.

Charles Fritz adds, "Before moving here, we were cautioned about the potential safety concerns living in a developing country, and we recognized that our lack of Spanish fluency could make my wife and me easy targets.

"Fortunately, as yet, this has not been a concern at all. We have been treated with nothing but kindness and consideration. People here really want you to be happy in their country and seem to have a genuine affection for North Americans. They go out of their way to help in any way possible".

Finding Fellow Foreigners

Santo Domingo is not yet a mainstream expat destination, but, historically, it's even less of a retirement destination.

The expat community that does exist here is of a different ilk than that of most other destinations we talk about—they're a working bunch. The majority of foreigners that live here were placed by a corporation and relocated for a job. The rest of the North Americans in Santo Domingo are mostly English teachers.

The nationalities here are an even mix between North Americans and Europeans... but the Europeans are mostly working folk, too. More recently, Venezuelans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans are arriving in great numbers. The Venezuelans seem to come mostly from the professional class and are bringing welcome revenue into the country.



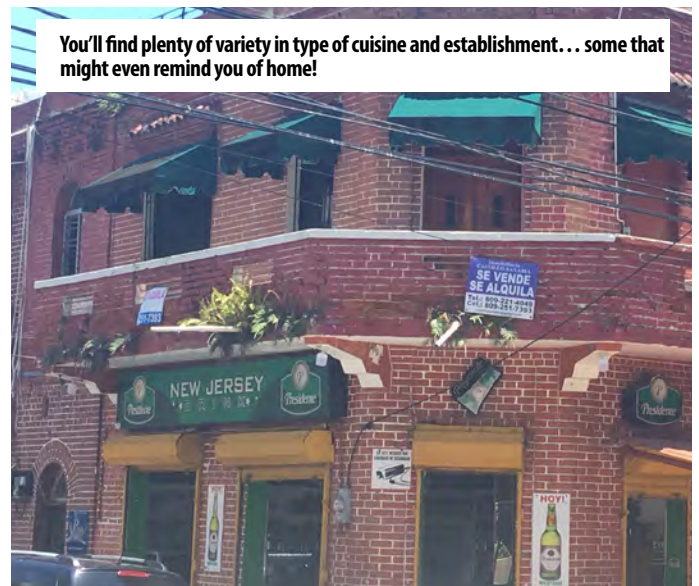
The expat community here is not as large as in the beach communities, but it's ripe for growth. Many of the newer condo building projects are including more amenities that appeal to expats, such as swimming pools and gyms.

Organized groups or societies for foreigners are few. InterNations hosts many functions throughout Santo Domingo and joining this global network is a great way to break into the local social scene and meet other expats with similar interest. Hash House Harriers also has a chapter here and is always eager for new members.

And The International Women's Club (IWC) also has a chapter here, open to all English-speaking women living in the Dominican Republic, regardless of nationality. This super-active group hosts regular get-togethers for members and also works to help the local community, hosting many charity events throughout the year.

Dominican Eats

With over 500 years of foreign influences to fuse with, Dominican cuisine is unlike that of any other Caribbean nation.



Food here is hearty and flavorful, though not spicy as some Caribbean food can be. This is an important distinction. If you see a pepper symbol on the menu to indicate spiciness, rest assured it's mild at best. If you want true spice, you have to ask for it.

While the beef is nothing to boast about, the fact that cow isn't the main meat source here is cause for much

creativity. On any given menu, you're almost sure to find at least one goat dish (but usually goat comes in a few different forms), often accompanied by lamb, rabbit, and guinea fowl, along with the more typical seafood, pork, and chicken. In the north, try the regional delicacy, *chivo liniero*, for which the goats graze on wild oregano, thereby seasoning its own meat while still alive.

Not to mention the seafood, of course... you'll find plenty fish and shellfish aplenty on every menu, most of it fresh-caught the same day it's cooked. Coconut is a popular ingredient and is incorporated into many a fish dish (along with others).

You'll also notice an abundance of soups and stews. No self-respecting Dominican restaurant would skip *sancocho*, which is excellent, but you'll usually also always see seafood soup, *asopaos* (soups that come with lots of rice), and stews, called *guisados*, *cocidos*, or *estofados*.

Locrio is a descendent of Valencian paella, brought by the Spanish. An aromatic rice with meat and seafood, this Caribbean version makes a few substitutions that give it a Latin flair. The story goes that the women who arrived here couldn't find the same spices they used back home, they found the most similar thing growing locally, for example, annatto instead of saffron.

However, that's talking local food in local places. If you want upscale, you won't be disappointed. The incredible standard of cuisine and dining this city has to offer surprises many, but they're on par with any other world capital... as are their prices.



Upscale plating to match the picturesque plaza setting (pumpkin soup with bagel grilled cheese)

Dominican meals are usually long, leisurely affairs, and nearly always accompanied by beer... even business lunches typically see at least one bottle per person downed. When ordering a beer you're likely to hear the phrase *vestida de novia*, "in a wedding dress," for the frosty white coating of an ice-cold bottle.

Dinner is eaten late, with the earliest being around 8 p.m. but 9 being more typical... which means you may still be finishing off a dish around midnight... Coffee, anyone?

Once you've been around the block, you'll start to notice the prevalence of shared dishes on a menu—usually they comprise half the menu, but you can be sure of at least a full-page section of them. While they aren't usually called tapas, sometimes that's exactly what they are: small tasting dishes designed for two people to share... and sometimes they are heaping plates of grilled food designed for a large family.

It makes it hard to price dishes or meals as we normally would (cost of appetizer, main course, etc.), because just about anything on any menu could be more than enough for two—regardless of whether it's called an *entrada* or a *plato fuerte* (starter or main).

Dominicans like to share, and they like to take their time when eating. Why order a single plate for one when you can order many plates for many and share them all leisurely? While I was out eating with friends here, sharing was inevitable; every meal becomes family style. I love this strategy—it means I get to taste a bite of everything that looked good on the menu! A couple I was traveling with while in the DR picked at the group appetizers and then always shared a main dish... and usually left some on the plate.

Don't forget about dessert—Dominican cacao is some of the most highly valued in the world, and is a leading global exporter of high-quality organic cacao and bananas, as well as being the largest worldwide producer of premium cigars. And, of course, the coffee... All these wonderful things are enjoyed by locals and foreigners alike.

High Culture And Having Fun

There certainly is no lack of entertainment in Santo Domingo, particularly in the Piantini district, which has several good malls, theaters, and fantastic restaurants, and in the Colonial Zone, the heart of the city's pedestrian and café culture.

***Sancocho* Across The Americas**

Sancocho is Spanish for chicken soup, but every country does it differently—sometimes very differently. Said to cure all ills, much as we say chicken soup does back home, *sancocho* is given to those sick, hungover, heartbroken, or simply to help heal the soul. In many countries, it's one of the staple foods of *carnaval*—which is a little strange considering the tropical weather and the outdoor party that is *carnaval* on the equator!

Personally, the Dominican Republic's version is my favorite to date. . .

Certainly, it's thicker than most I've had. While I find most countries design it as a chicken broth with a few legs of chicken, some yucca, and usually a large hunk of corn on the cob (a challenge to eat, to say the least), the Dominican version is more substantial.

The broth itself is closer to a thin stew base than broth, the chicken still come bone-in, but it's been cooked so well, all you have to do is pick up the bone and watch the meat fall away. Instead of corn cobs, you're more likely to have more than one root vegetable accompany your meat, including carrots and yucca but also a sweet potatoes and other interesting tubers.

Often served in a huge clay bowl, it's typically eaten as a full meal, and you'll be asked what side you want with it (rice is a great accompaniment, as you can combine the two to make the dish even heartier).



For the best sightseeing, the Colonial Zone is not to be missed. Visiting Parque Colon and strolling Calle de Las Damas is something residents never tire of, and you'll find several galleries and small museums throughout the colonial city. Not to be missed is a meal at Pat'e Palo. The eatery was established in 1505 by a retired one-legged, one-eyed pirate and is located across a courtyard from the Columbus family home... it's a truly unique Dominican experience.



The vestiges of the Spanish Colonial period offer many pursuits... Fort Ozama, Plaza de España, La Atarazana, the Royal Shipyards, the Convent of the Dominican Order, and Calle El Conde top the list. Take a tour through the ancient ruins at Monasterio de San Francisco, or, for a more modern tour, visit Kah Kow Experience to see chocolate production from the pod to the bar.

You should also take a jaunt to the Columbus Lighthouse, a fascinating structure said to contain the remains of Columbus (or at least part of them... [see sidebar](#)).

If you're looking for upscale activities, Plaza de la Cultura in Gascue is where to go. This cultural headquarters and community center complex offers a wealth of education and entertainment, including the National Theater, National Library, National Film Library, the Gallery of Modern Art, the Museum of Natural History, the Museum of History and Geography, and the Museum of Dominican History... all set among bucolic gardens and splashing fountains.

Protecting Their Legacy

Mother Nature gave with both hands when she created the island of Hispaniola, and the Dominican Republic recognizes that ecology and ecotourism could be its single greatest natural resource.

Unfortunately for the island, Haiti hasn't been as successful in protecting its environment, and many species unique to the island now only survive on the DR's side, making conservation efforts all the more poignant here.

This country is home to the largest lake (Lake Enriquillo, 265 square kms), the highest peak (Pico Duarte, 3,098 meters), and the most biodiversity in the Caribbean (including the world's smallest lizard and scorpion and, remarkably, four bird species that have gone extinct in Haiti, along with dozens of reptiles, amphibians, fish, and bugs of all sorts unique to the country).

With over 25% of its area designated as protected land, there's plenty to explore throughout the DR's 19 national parks, 15 natural reserves, 32 natural monuments, 9 protected islands, 6 scientific reserves, and 2 marine sanctuaries (for a total of 83 protected areas).

The DR was remarkably prescient when it came to conservation efforts, establishing their first marine sanctuary, the Marine Mammal Sanctuary, in Samaná in 1966. With 3,000 to 5,000 whales migrating through the northern waters each year to give birth and mate, they put on a real show from January to March.

Be sure not to miss:

- **The country's largest collections of petroglyphs in Los Haitises Park—created by the indigenous Taíno, these pre-Columbian drawings of birds, whales, and gods are a great way to connect with the island's ancient history.**
- **Over 100 bird species—including the rare white-crowned pigeon, the Hispaniola parrot, and the red-footed boobie—in Parque Nacional del Este, the best in the country for birding.**
- **The second smallest bird in the world, the zumbadorcito, which can be spotted from the Ébano Verde Scientific Reserve in Constanza.**
- **The desert island of Isla Cabritos and all its resident crocodiles in the center of Lake Enriquillo, the lowest point in the Caribbean (at approximately 43 meters below sea level).**
- **The closest to the capital: Submarino La Caleta National Park, home to part of the country's coral reef and one of the most popular dive sites with the wreck of Hickory, a sunken treasure-hunting ship, and underwater Taíno Indian caves.**

Where In The World Is Christopher Columbus?

The famous explorer was a voyager even in death; he died in Valladolid, Spain, but his body didn't stay there long...

Columbus' remains were moved a couple times within Spain before they left the country, sent to Santo Domingo, where Columbus' wished them to be, and where they stayed for a couple of centuries.

When Spain lost control of the Dominican Republic, they were sent to Cuba, where the Spanish Crown still held sway. Finally, a century later, they were sent back to Spain to be laid in the cathedral of Seville.

But in 1877 a lead box with the inscription "The illustrious and excellent man, Don Colón, Admiral of the Ocean Sea" was found in Santo Domingo, giving rise to speculation that some remains were actually kept in the country.

The remains in Spain have been DNA tested and concluded to be of Columbus' bloodline, but historians agree that some body parts may have been kept in the DR, hence this coffin.

Regardless, the coffin and whoever lies inside is on view in the mausoleum, and the structure also houses a museum.

The Fine Arts Palace hosts the Fine Arts Theater, National Folkloric Ballet, National School of Dance, National Choir, and School for Dramatic Arts. The capital is also home to the National Symphony Orchestra of the Dominican Republic, which hosts many events throughout the year.

Partner dancing is still as popular in Latin America as it was in the States throughout most of the 20th century, and Dominicans are particularly known for their love of music and dance. Father Labat, a French monk who arrived in the here in 1795 when Spain ceded the island to France, observed: "Dance is, in Santo Domingo, the favorite passion, and I don't believe that there is anywhere in the world where people are more drawn to musical vibrations." Singing and dancing are to the Dominican soul as food is to bellies—necessary for life. Here, *cantos de hacha* (axe songs) are sung while working the *conuco* (small farm), prayers are chanted more than said, serenading a lover is still common when wooing, and when a child dies in rural areas, mourners sing dirges called *baquini*.

Go out here at night, and you're sure to encounter music, likely live, and likely accompanied by dance. Merengue is the special dance of the DR, declared by UNESCO as a World Intangible Cultural Heritage, but you'll hear plenty of bachata and salsa, too. Dancing is a great way to meet people and stay in shape, and embracing it will give you a foot in the door of local culture.

For cinephiles, movie theaters here are modern and comfortable, showing current box-office attractions, even in 3D and IMAX.

For a taste of the great outdoors within the city limits, take a wander through the National Botanical Garden, ranked by England's Kew Gardens among the 10 best in the world, or head to the National Zoo.

The malecón is a great place for a jog or long bike ride, as are any of the city parks: the Centro Olímpico (full of playing fields and courts, plus track and field), Paseo de los Indios (more commonly called Mirador Sur), Núñez de Cáceres Environmental Park, and Iberoamérica Park, which is also home to the National Conservatory of Music, the Nuryn Sanlley amphitheater, an open-air gym, a children's area, and an iguana farm.

Several of our expat friends in the DR claim one of their favorite pastimes is attending baseball games in "winter," complete with dancing cheerleaders and ice-cold Presidente beers. Baseball, be it professional or amateur, reigns supreme as the number one sport here.

If you're more into participating than spectating, any just about any sport you'd want to play is here: basketball, boxing, fencing, judo, karate, tennis, billiards, bowling, gymnastics, karting...

Nature At Your Doorstep

This is a city... to enjoy the best of Dominican nature, you'll have to head out of town. But once you get there, boy, is there a lot to keep you busy. Mountains, jungle, pine woods, mangrove swamps, coral reefs,



immaculate beaches, and fertile land... this island packs a biodiverse punch.

With dozens of trails of all difficulties, along rivers and up mountains, hikers from novice to veteran will find something to suit them here. For a hike with an educational element, try the coffee route, the cocoa route, or agricultural treks, like the “Ginger Route” and the “Pineapple Route” (both in Samaná).

The DR’s cerulean surf is some of the most famous in the world for good reason. Take it from the United Nations, who reported, “Of all the tourist beaches in the world, few are blessed with such beautiful grains of sand or crystal-clear waters. The beaches are strewn with granules of sand that are so white that they seem nearly magical, fantastic. Without question, they must rank among the best in the world.”

Spend a day at the beach at Boca Chica (just under an hour from the city), or Juan Dolio (just over an hour), or go further afield to enjoy this country’s famous white-sand beaches. The north coast is a three-and-a-half hour drive from the city; Punta Cana is about two hours; the Samaná Peninsula is about two-and-an-half.

Dominican Festivals

In Santo Domingo:

Bonyé

San Francisco Ruins, Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo; Sundays
Join the crowd for live music by the Bonyé group every Sunday.

Carnaval

Throughout the country; February/March

Carnaval, the celebration before lent that culminates on Mardi Gras, is celebrated fanatically throughout Latin America.

Bienal Nacional de Artes Visuales

Location determined annually; August

RD Fashion Week

Location determined annually; July

Santo Domingo Colonial Fest

November

Dominicana Moda

Santo Domingo; October

Fashion week in the DR.

Festival Musical de Santo Domingo

Santo Domingo; March

Noche Larga de los Museos

Santo Domingo; March, June, September, December

Late night or all-night opening for the city’s museums.

Further Afield:

Festival de las Flores

Jarabacoa; June

Bocao Food Fest

Bocao, July

Expo Mango

Baní; June

Procigar Festival

Punta Cana/La Romana; February

Dominican Republic Jazz Festival

Cabarete, Puerto Plata; November

On any coast, you’ll find tranquil waters for relaxing and strong surf for water sports, including: windsurfing, jet skiing, sailing, sport and deep-sea fishing, kitesurfing, surfing, diving, snorkeling, etc. Visit coral reefs, fish sanctuaries, and treasure-laden sunken vessels from the age of high-sea piracy. Take a hot-air balloon ride in Punta Cana—with the only company in the Caribbean licensed to fly them.

The mountains are also not far from the city, within a couple of hours you could be hiking in virgin jungles or exploring sheltered towns that cling to their traditional ways of life.

There are plenty of world-class boating marinas and golf courses throughout the country. Of 18-hole courses, choose among 28 (with another 12 under construction), with some designed by names such as P.B. Dye (Casa de Campo, 5 courses), Robert Trent Jones (Playa Dorada), Jack Nicklaus (internationally recognized Punta Espada in Cap Cana, named by Golf Magazine as one of the best in the world).

Equestrian sports are available... racing has always been popular, but polo has recently risen to fame. Increasingly, polo is a serious sport here, with the best facilities in the entire Caribbean at Cap Cana in Punta Cana. In any part of the country you could horse ride—perhaps to a secluded waterfall, like El Limón in Samaná, or similar.

Fishing here is some of the best in the world, whether just for fun or for competition (several annual tournaments are held around the country).

Health Care

In the capital, you've got access to the best the country has to offer. Emergency services exist, in fact, a new 911 service was instituted in 2016 and is operating effectively. And Santo Domingo has four private hospitals with good reputations—more than any other city in the country. Doctors at these hospitals would speak English, though you can't be sure of that in smaller, more rural facilities.

Almost all expats get health insurance, are treated privately, and rate the personal treatment they receive by medical professionals very highly. We know one expat who's saving US\$72,000 a year on his health bills thanks to free treatment at his hospital in Santo Domingo.

Charles Fritz adds, "My wife and I have a quarterly health insurance payment of US\$205 covering both of us at an extensive list of private hospitals, clinics, and doctors.

"Our two hospital experiences have been very positive. Without an appointment, my wife went to the hospital, quickly saw a specialist, had lab work and ultrasound done. Everything was done at one location, with the assistance of a translator. Total out-of-pocket expenses were US\$21, with results of all tests in hand before leaving. All done in two hours.

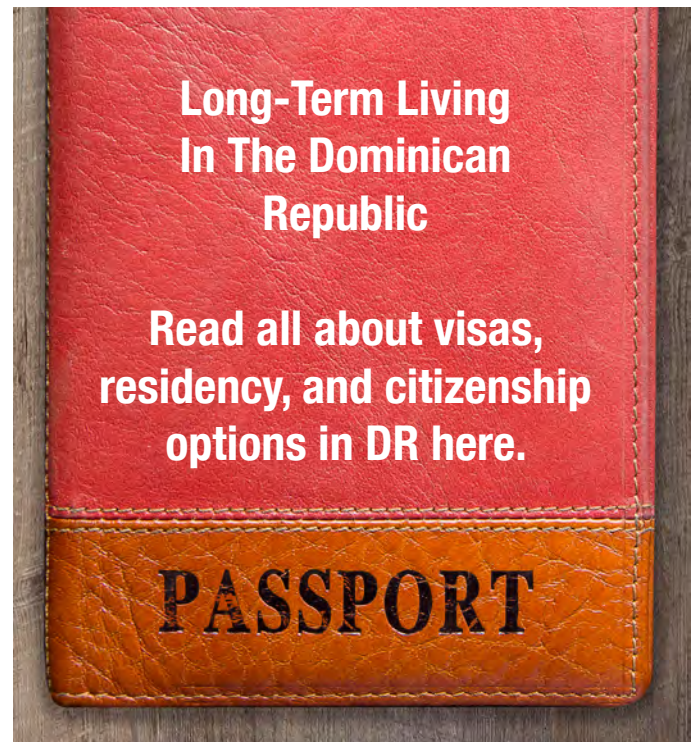
"I also did my residency physical here and once again was pleased with the service."

While these issues won't affect you living in the city and seeking private care, it's worth knowing that although public health services in the Dominican Republic are extremely affordable, the standard can be poor. For example, blood supplies at both private and public hospitals are often limited, and not all facilities have blood on hand in case of emergency.

Arriving And Staying

Residency in the Dominican Republic is easy, and the country embraces and even incentivizes foreign residents and investors. Residents can apply for loans and import household goods and a car tax-free.

Plus, there's a reasonably affordable and fast option for citizenship.



The Property Market

Real estate opportunities abound here. This country has been on our short list of the world's top property investment markets since 2012, and we don't see that changing any time soon.

We were among the first to shine the light on this country for American property investors, but its miles and miles of soft-sand beaches had been attracting foreign tourists and European investors for decades before that. The

French, especially, have been moving to and investing in the Dominican Republic for generations.

Part of the hype is the quality for price. High-end finishings are available locally—as are highly skilled general contractors. And construction prices here are lower than elsewhere in the Caribbean, averaging just over US\$2,000 per square meter (US\$200 per square foot).

Real estate was a great bargain in the Dominican Republic in 2005. Then came 2008/2009, when the bottom fell out of global property markets around the world. The DR wasn't immune to the dramatic down cycle.

Prices have moved up in recent years and are moving up more sharply right now (thanks to the strong local economy and expanding tourism, both local and international) but remain a good value in most areas.

Rental yields can run to the high end of the 5% to 8% range you should expect generally in any market. With some work, you can find opportunities to push net yields into the double digits. Well-priced ocean-view properties in prime tourist areas are the sweet spot.

In Santo Domingo, a burst of new high-rise (a high-rise by DR standards means up to 15 stories tall) buildings means pre-construction opportunities. Developers give the best prices when they launch a building so they can get

construction going. Expect prices to increase as much as 10% or more during construction.

Flipping upon completion is one option with a pre-construction buy. However, in Santo Domingo, you could improve your long-term return by holding onto a unit and renting it out furnished on the short-term business-traveler market.

One developer offering buildings in central Santo Domingo that would work for this kind of rental is [Inverlisa Inmobiliaria](#).

Santo Domingo also offers one of the biggest Spanish-colonial zones in all the Americas. The government has been improving the infrastructure in this area, which has become a central tourism zone for both land-based travelers and cruise-goers. You'll find more restaurants, museums, boutique hotels, and shops catering to tourists in this area every time you visit.

While much of the Spanish-colonial has been renovated already, you can still find buildings available for fixing up. You have to be careful when shopping in this zone to make sure you're paying a fair price. The historic properties for sale are controlled by one or two real estate agencies that price them on request, depending on who's inquiring. Make inquiries through a local contact if possible.



One property I saw a few months ago was listed on an agency website for US\$1.2 million. No way this building was worth that price, but I was interested in the property so I asked our local attorney to see what she could find out.

My attorney was able to make contact with the owner of the building, who said he's asking US\$250,000—and my legal counsel was that the building could be had for US\$200,000.

We've been recommending property investment in the DR for the past decade. Over that time, values have increased... but not as dramatically as we predict they are going to move up from here.

Right now, DR property prices are low for the Caribbean... downright cheap in some areas. Rental yields are strong—reaching into double digits—in the beach resort areas and capital city Santo Domingo.

Financing

Local banks will lend to foreigners—whether you hold residency or not—for the purchase of real estate. The terms will depend on the source of your income. You'll be required to make a bigger down payment if your qualifying income is coming from outside the DR. Expect a loan to value of no more than 80% and probably no more than 70%, depending on your personal financial statements.

Interest rates are higher than the low rates currently available in the United States and Europe. Expect a rate in the 8% to 10% range, with terms of maybe 15 to 20 years. Additionally, most banks won't give you a mortgage beyond the age of 75.



Our #1 Offshore Haven

The Dominican Republic first came onto our radar in 2005. It was the country's undervalued beachfront property that got our attention back then. These days, though, we focus on the DR's diversification opportunities in a bigger-picture way.

Now that we've gotten to know it as well as we have, we believe this island nation is as close to perfect as an offshore destination gets. And we're not alone. The DR was one of the few tax-haven countries to not be included on the EU's now-infamous black and gray lists (first released in Dec. 2017 and amended several times since). This is just another feather in the cap for this transparent above-board, offshore haven.

The DR checks nearly every box on our flag-planting list, boasting:

- One of the world's best residency-for-citizenship options;
- A strong, stable, and growing banking industry that still welcomes Americans;
- An approach to taxation that favors the expat;
- One of the world's top real estate investment markets.

Five Flags Scorecard

Diversification Report Card	
Residency	B+
Citizenship	A
Banking	B+
Taxation	B
Real estate	A

Again, bottom line, this country is as close to perfect as an offshore destination gets right now.



Banking

Banks in this country have not shut their doors to Americans as have banks in many other jurisdictions. DR banks are FATCA-compliant, meaning an American opening an account with a DR bank must complete a W-9 form just as you would when opening an account in the United States.

Other paperwork requirements are standard. You'll need a copy of your passport, maybe a second ID, a reference letter from your current bank (which can be waived if you are able to obtain an introduction locally), and, increasingly, proof of income.

Account options are similar to those in the United States, including checking, savings, and CDs. You can hold deposits in U.S. dollars or Dominican Republic pesos.

Interest rates here are good. CD rates for U.S. dollar deposits run in the 3% to 4% range. Peso CD rates are higher, as local interest rates remain high compared with the rest of the world.

Banking is easy, but options aren't as broad as in a bonafide banking center, with fewer than 20 banks in operation. We recommend sticking with the biggest and best-known among these—Scotiabank, Banco Popular, Citbank, or Banreservas.

Plus, there's no stock market and only a small local bond market here. Some banks offer private banking, but, really, the DR is an option for holding some money in another jurisdiction in the form of liquid investments—cash, CDs, or bonds. Banks that trade in local company and government bonds help “make the market” so their clients have liquidity.



Taxes

The DR takes a jurisdictional approach to taxation, meaning it taxes residents only on income earned within the country... except for foreign residents, who are technically liable for tax on their foreign-sourced income from their third taxable year as a resident.

You're considered a resident for tax purposes if you spend 183 days or more in the country in any given year.

However, obtain citizenship, and you're no longer a foreign resident for tax purposes... you're a citizen.

If you are earning income in the DR, you'll be liable for income tax on a scaled basis according to these four tax bands—0%, 15%, 20%, and 25%. The zero rate applies up to 409,281 DR pesos, which is almost US\$9,000 at today's exchange rate. The 25% bracket kicks in at 852,667 DR pesos, or about US\$19,000 today.

Run a business in the DR and basically every expense you can prove with a factura fiscal is deductible.

The bad news regarding taxes in the DR is capital gains, which are taxed at 27%. If you invest in real estate and sell it for a profit, you'll have a tax on the gains in the DR. Of course, if you're an American, any tax paid in the DR can be used to offset your tax due on the U.S. side.

Real estate is exempt from property taxes up to a value of 6.7 million DR pesos, or about US\$147,000 as of this writing. Property taxes are 1% of the amount over the exemption.

The final tax to be aware of in the DR is the inheritance tax, which is 3% of the value of the inherited estate.

All in all, the DR is a favorable tax jurisdiction, with the exception of the capital gain tax, which is higher than in many countries. For Americans, again, though, this tax isn't the end of the world, as you'll be liable for taxes on any DR capital gains in the United States anyway.

Dominican Downfalls

Even life in Shangri-la has its downsides... Living on an island is not for everyone, and, likewise, living in the Caribbean is not without its compromises.



The mañana attitude is no myth, it's a fact of life that pervades the Americas—especially the middle band hugging the equator—and the DR is no exception. Island time is a time zone of its own, with appointments generally at least an hour later than agreed upon, whether the meeting be casual or professional.

The traffic in Santo Domingo is atrocious, no two ways about it. Rush hours are hellish... but they also seem to go on all day long. There may be an hour's lull in the morning or mid-afternoon, but, otherwise, it seems that the traffic here never dies down much, especially in certain neighborhoods.

Says full-time Santo Domingo expat, Charles Fritz, "Life here in the capital is more like life in New York City, LA, or Chicago. Traffic is heavy, and traffic laws seem to be mere suggestions. The constant sounds of motorbikes, honking horns, and street vendors may be too much if you value peace and serenity."

The term "yes men" takes on a whole new scope of meaning here. I've spent time in countries where local culture resists giving the honest answer, but it's more dramatic here than anywhere else in my experience. Whether it's because they

don't know the answer or are afraid it's not the one you want, you're never likely to get a straight answer—especially if a "no" is involved.

If you ask directions to someone who doesn't know the way, they'll still give them to you... and who knows where you might end up. If you ask two questions in succession, the answer you get may only apply to one of your queries... and you may never know which it was. If you ask for a timeframe (for example, when documents will be processed), the answer will almost inevitably be two weeks... but the person doesn't actually have any idea. There is no timeframe, they just give you an answer to make you happy (or so you stop asking the question).

Friendly society begs for extroverts. This highly social and open culture is an introvert's nightmare. It's incredibly easy to establish friendly connections here, but you have to be prepared for the responsibility that comes with them... you have to maintain them or risk your reputation. If you become less friendly, you'll be thought less of and eventually written off.

Similar to always putting on a happy, friendly, ready-to-chat face, you don't show negative emotions in public. This

attitude pervades Latin America; people here generally don't complain or demand. They don't argue, become exasperated or frustrated—and certainly never outright angry—in public. Showing too much negative emotion in public draws attention for how unusual it is. If you nag or complain vocally, Dominicans will shut down... or simply walk away.

On the other hand, Dominicans aren't a quiet bunch when it comes to other facets of life... They are world renowned for speaker-blowing decibel levels when it comes to music. If you're living in a condo building that isn't catering to expats, you'll have to come to terms with your neighbors' jamming habits—or learn to embrace them...

Charles Fritz admits he's come to like this aspect of life: "The ability to ignore loud noise has proven to be an advantage for us. For the first time in my life, I can play my own music at whatever volume I choose without disturbing the neighbors. Hopefully my Dominican neighbors are enjoying my Carolina beach music and the sounds of Memphis, New Orleans, and Nashville. No one has complained yet..."

Litter... There's no skirting it, Santo Domingo has bad pollution problems. On your drive from the airport into the city you'll see plenty of trash on the sides of the road, in the water, and on the city streets. While this is a significant problem throughout the country, education initiatives are underway, and the capital is campaigning strongly for this to change.



Santo Domingo is plastered with signs promoting proper care of the city



Air pollution here is the worst in the country, being the most populated area, the particulates coming mostly from vehicle emissions, backyard burning of garbage, and power generation, including the high number of private generators used to supplement the national system. The air quality thought to contribute to high levels of acute bronchitis in the city.

Water pollution is also a problem, studies have found the water around the nearby Boca Chica beach to be highly polluted. The Ozama River that feeds tributary Isabela River is one of the country's most polluted, the basin contaminated by untreated industrial runoff and raw sewage.

This is probably the worst city in the DR for pollution, so if you're sensitive to it, Santo Domingo isn't for you.



Safety

Allow me to set the scene: I am a 20-something blond gringa who stands out everywhere she goes in Latin America. Moving around Santo Domingo on my own, some folks I spoke with found it hard to believe I felt comfortable enough to fly solo (an unaccompanied female in the streets—gasp!).

I've only been met with the most friendly and helpful of people on the streets. Not to say I would go out on my own at night (which even local men I've talked to avoid), but during the day—in what is the most densely populated part of the country with the highest rate of crime—I haven't ever felt unsafe...

That's not to say crime isn't a real concern. Petty theft is the main issue you need to be alert for. Avoid walking alone and stick to tourist zones at night.

Charles Fritz comments, "We feel safe where we live, but we have quickly learned where not to go. Most apartment buildings are gated with private security, and that's where the expats would likely be living. Like in the States, your own personal behavior is the best deterrent from being a crime victim."



In the parts of Santo Domingo an expat would spend time in, I found there to be cops on every corner—all eager to welcome foreigners and make sure they feel safe. This is the case even outside the Zona Colonial, but within the ZC it's even more so. Guards are stationed every block, there are

lots of hotels and restaurants with employees hanging out outside (meaning there are no real “back alleys” to feel unseen and like a target in), and this is also the area that both expats and wealthy Dominicans hang out in, so you’ll see people walk around more confidently than they would elsewhere in the city in jewelry or with cameras around their necks.

That said, I did keep my wits about me more than I generally would in Europe, for example... I didn’t walk with headphones in, I never stopped on the street to look at a map, I kept my phone in my front pocket instead of my back (and only took out for a quick snap, then back in the pocket instantly). I used a more secure purse when walking around than I normally use, and kept valuables to a minimum (only carried ID, 2 credit cards, and minimal cash, as opposed to full wallet) and in the innermost pocket where it couldn’t be picked. I also wore less jewelry than I usually do (and less than I like to).

These were compromises I made based on my usual lifestyle preferences—i.e., wearing gold jewelry and typically being much less careful with my phone, purse, and its contents. But these were only compromises because that’s who I am otherwise... I like flashy jewelry and purses... I dress up more than I dress down...

I think the majority of people for whom the DR appeals prefer a simpler, more “beach friendly” outward appearance by nature, so these things would be how they act and dress normally. They don’t wear gold. They carry beach bags instead of designer purses and just some cash in a rubber band. They already take the “precautions” that I go out of my way to adjust to.

Again, someone who likes heels, designer goods, and flashy jewelry isn’t often the same kind of person who wants to live on a Caribbean beach island in my experience.

Santo Domingo—Who Is It Good For?

Today, Santo Domingo, capital of the country with the fastest-growing economy in Latin America, is chasing a new prosperity. The streets are lively, the harbor busy.

From real estate to the general cost of living, it can be hard to believe you’re in the Caribbean when here. Prices across the board are more Latin American. You could live well in the DR on your monthly Social Security check alone.

And recently upgraded airports mean you can get to the Dominican Republic from the U.S. East Coast in two hours.

Most of the world knows the Dominican Republic for its white-sand beaches. The expanding tourist traffic to this island nation’s many coastal resorts is a key driver of the economic growth the country is enjoying.

And I appreciate a beautiful beach as much as the next chica... But, for many, the real appeal of the Dominican Republic is Santo Domingo, the oldest European city in the Americas. 📖

About The Author



Kat Kalashian has grown up around the world, living in the United States, Ireland, France, and Panama, and has traveled extensively in her few years.

Having grown up as a young expat, she is familiar with the trials and tribulations of an overseas move and the adjustments that must be made in every new destination.

Living and learning through experience, she now considers no one place home and feels more comfortable in new environs than in familiar ones.

Kat relocated to Panama full-time in 2011 and has enjoyed settling into life in the tropics. Her post as Editor-in-Chief of Live and Invest Overseas keeps her busy, but she is also able to indulge her passions from her home base of Panama City. The thriving metropolis offers the perfect blend of first-world culture (she is an avid ballroom dancer) and the opportunity for rugged adventure (she is also a competitive horse rider).

Overseas Living Letter Resources

Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic



Budgets



Shopping
List



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