



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Haiti covers 10,714 square miles (27,750 square kilometers) of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with the Dominican Republic. Just smaller than Maryland, Haiti is comprised of two peninsulas split by the Gulf of Gonâve. The mountainous, nearly barren island of Gonâve rests in the center of the gulf.

Haiti's portion of Hispaniola is significantly more mountainous than the rest of the island, with successive mountain chains running east to west on both peninsulas. The northern Massif du Nord is part of the island's backbone, which Dominicans call the Cordillera Central. The southern peninsula boasts the Massif de la Hotte and Massif de la Selle. The highest peak, Pic la Selle, is located in the Massif de la Selle and rises to 8,793 feet (2,680 meters). The mountains are punctuated by hills and valleys, where most people live and work. The four main plains include the Central, Northern, Artibonite, and Plaine du Cul-de-Sac (where the capital, Port-au-Prince, is located). Haiti is crossed by several large rivers, the longest of which is the Artibonite.

Haiti's climate is warm and only mildly humid. Frost, snow, and ice do not form anywhere—even at the highest elevations. The average temperature in the mountains is 66°F (19°C), while at Port-au-Prince it is 81°F (27°C). Spring and autumn are rainy, whereas December through February and June through August are dry. July is the driest summer month. The hurricane season lasts from June to October.

History. The island of Hispaniola was originally inhabited by Taino and Arawak Indians. After Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492 and opened Spanish colonization on Hispaniola, the indigenous peoples were enslaved. Within a few decades, a million of them died from starvation, European dis-

eases such as smallpox and measles, and hard labor in Spanish gold mines. In a belated effort to save the remaining Indians and to help their sugar plantations prosper, the Spanish settlers began importing African slaves by 1517. By 1560, few Indians remained. The 2,000 Spanish settlers controlled the island and some 30,000 African slaves. In 1697, Spain ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France, which soon enjoyed the coffee, sugar, and cotton riches of its new colony, Saint Domingue. France was given the entire island by 1795, although it didn't fully control the eastern half.

The Haitian Slave Revolt began in 1791. Though slaves were granted their freedom by 1793, leaders such as Toussaint L'Ouverture (a freed slave) continued to fight European powers for control of the island. Though L'Ouverture was eventually captured and subsequently died in a French prison, his successor Jean-Jacques Dessalines gained victory over the French in 1803. Haiti declared its independence on 1 January 1804. French settlers who were not killed left the island. Dessalines became the emperor.

When Dessalines was killed in 1806, political chaos and rivalries led to General Henry Christophe gaining the throne in 1811. However, Christophe did not control the southern half of the nation. He ruled the north as King Henry I until he committed suicide in 1820. In 1822, north and south were reunited under President Jean-Pierre Boyer, who finally gained control over the Dominican Republic. The era still perpetuates tensions between the two neighbors. Boyer got France to recognize Haitian independence in 1825 by agreeing to pay over the next century roughly 100 million francs in reparation to former slaveholders, a sum that crippled Haiti's already weak economy. After Boyer was overthrown in 1844, power changed

Haiti

hands a few times until the 20th century, which found Haiti near anarchy. Under the United States' Monroe Doctrine, which essentially sought to maintain U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere, U.S. troops invaded and occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

The following years did not bring stability to Haiti, as people revolted against the government and elites who controlled it. In 1957, François Duvalier won presidential elections, despite charges of fraud. He killed his opponents and ruled with impunity, terrorizing the populace with his *Tontons macoutes*, the secret police. Before he died in 1971, "Papa Doc" Duvalier designated his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, "Baby Doc," as his successor. Riots in 1985 forced Duvalier to flee Haiti in 1986.

A succession of military-led governments ruled Haiti until 1990, when Jean-Bertrand Aristide became the nation's first democratically elected president. Glee over his election was followed by impatience for reform and violence between Aristide's supporters and opponents. After just eight months in office, the military—led by General Raoul Cédras—took power. Aristide made his way to the United States and set up a government in exile. His supporters in Haiti either went into hiding or were killed. The military dictatorship became increasingly brutal, and the international community decided to intervene with an embargo, though its effect was diminished by smuggling through the neighboring Dominican Republic.

In September 1994, about 20,000 U.S. soldiers landed in Haiti to overthrow the military. A few weeks later, Aristide returned from exile to rule for nearly a decade. However, he was overthrown again in 2004. Though UN peacekeepers have been in the country since 2004 and a democratically elected government came to power in 2006, Haiti continues to struggle with violent clashes between government and opposition groups as well as economic devastation. In April 2008, high food prices sparked anti-government demonstrations that led to parliament's dismissal of the prime minister. Later that year, hurricanes and tropical storms left hundreds dead and thousands homeless.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Haiti's population of 8.9 million is growing annually at about 2.5 percent. The country has a high birthrate, but emigration and poor health keep overall growth rates down. Most Haitians are descendants of African slaves who came to the island beginning in the 16th century. A small proportion of Haiti's people (5 percent) are of mixed heritage or white. A large number of Haitians live in Florida, New York, and Montréal, and there are Haitian communities in other parts of Canada and the United States as well.

Language. Haitian Creole is the language of daily conversation. French is used in government and business. Only educated adults or secondary school students speak French. Haitian Creole is a unique mixture of French and African languages. It is similar to Creole spoken on some other Caribbean islands, such as Guadeloupe and Martinique. Haitian Creole is traditionally an oral language, though it had a written form even in the 19th century. Use of written Creole began to spread after the 1940s with the introduction of adult literacy programs. People are increasingly interested in English, which is heard on television broadcasts from the United States. Also, because many Haitian families have a relative in the United States, English is used more often than in the past.

Religion. The majority (80 percent) of Haitians are Catholic. Protestants claim 16 percent or more of the population. The

largest denominations are Baptist, Pentecostal, and Seventh-day Adventist.

Perhaps as important as organized religion is *vodou* (voodoo), which is practiced to some degree by a majority of Haitians. It was given legal status equal to other religions in 2003. Though the practice is opposed by Catholic priests, *vodou* has incorporated the worship of Catholic saints and the use of other Catholic rituals. *Vodou* ceremonies and rituals, held in temples, usually are performed at night. *Vodou* adherents believe that during the temple ceremonies, a *vodou* god inhabits the body of a believer. Not all *vodou* adherents practice the religion openly. Still, certain *vodou* temples are the focus of annual pilgrimages.

General Attitudes. Haitians are warm, friendly, and generous. Their tradition for hospitality is clear in how they treat guests or go out of their way to help strangers find an address or something else they need. Haitians are proud of their culture and history. The stories of past Haitian heroes are not forgotten by today's youth. Some claim this is because the present offers no heroes, but others believe the past gives hope for the future.

Everyday life is hard for most people, so parents strive to send their children to school, though it is very expensive, trusting that an education will give the next generation a better life. No matter what society's conditions, Haitians celebrate life with joy, laughter, and dancing.

Rural and middle-class urban people have different perspectives on life, as their cultural practices and attitudes vary significantly. Urban elites consider themselves to be more European or cosmopolitan than people from the countryside. The rural dwellers value their traditions and slower pace of life.

Personal Appearance. Whenever possible, people pay great attention to their public appearance. Urban Haitians prefer to wear Western-style clothing. Women may wear pants or colorful skirts. Some wear a headdress to match their outfits. Young people like to wear shorts; they follow the latest North American fashion trends. Sandals are the most popular footwear. Government officials and businessmen wear suits and ties. Rural men wear T-shirts and shorts or pants when working. Rural women wear dresses and head scarves, but they rarely wear pants. Almost all Haitian women enjoy jewelry (though it is often unaffordable) and brightly colored clothing. Men may wear gold jewelry as a status symbol.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Personal greetings are very important to Haitians. When entering a room or joining a group, a person is expected to physically greet each individual. Haitians usually shake hands when meeting a new acquaintance. Everyone else, from relatives to friends and casual acquaintances, receives a kiss on each cheek. The most common verbal greeting is *Bonjou, kouman ou ye?* (Good day, how are you?). The response usually is *M pa pi mal, e ou menm?* (I am not worse, and yourself?). Haitians address superiors or persons of status by title and last name (*Monsieur, Madame, Doctor*, etc.). Friends use first names or nicknames. An older person might be called "aunt" or "uncle" even if not related to the speaker.

Gestures. Haitians are an animated people who enjoy impromptu gatherings wherever they may be—at the market, in the street, at the movie theater. At such gatherings, people engage in loud conversation and laughing. Hand gestures usually accompany discussion or storytelling. If one is too busy to talk, one will greet a passerby by nodding the head up. To get someone's attention, Haitians often say "psst." Clicking

the tongue, called a *chipe*, is a sign of protest or disgust and considered impolite.

Visiting. Visiting is a national pastime. Friends, neighbors, and relatives are welcome in the home at any time of day until about 8 p.m. It is not necessary to call ahead. Visitors arriving during a meal may be asked to wait in another room until the family finishes eating. Close friends might be invited to share the meal. They may accept or decline. It is also acceptable for guests to decline refreshments. Hosts typically offer fruit juice or soda. In addition to impromptu visits, Haitians enjoy inviting friends over for an evening of socializing or for dinner. When a visit ends, hosts accompany guests to the door. Rather than leaving, however, Haitians frequently extend their visit for a while by standing and talking with their hosts.

Special occasions also call for visits. Guests take gifts to hosts celebrating a communion, baptism, graduation, or wedding—occasions for which many organize elaborate parties.

Eating. Haitians eat three meals a day if they can afford it. Peasants may eat *cassave* (bread made from manioc) and coffee for breakfast, and they may not eat again until evening. The family gathers at the table for the main meal, which is usually at midday in cities. Diners take their portions from serving dishes on the table. If guests are present, they are given first opportunity to serve themselves. When no guests are present, family members often wait for the mother to begin eating before they eat. People eat at restaurants for special occasions. Sunday dinner traditionally is reserved as a family meal.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The basic unit of society is the extended family. Parents live with their married children and grandchildren. The father, if present in the home, is head of the household and responsible for earning an income. Single-mother households are very common, as men typically have children by more than one woman in their lifetime. Children stay with the mother in a divorce; the divorce rate is fairly high.

Urban families might have three or four children, while rural families have ten or more. Rural men work their fields, while women sell produce in the market. Rural and urban women care for the household and children. Middle-class urban families may have a servant to cook and do other chores.

Housing. Houses are built with whatever materials are available. In older, established neighborhoods of the capital, two-storey brightly painted wood and brick houses are common. Middle-class families may have land dotted with tropical fruit trees, corn, or sugar cane. Primitive cinderblock houses are found in newer parts of the city. These houses often consist of just one nine-square-foot room with packed earth flooring and a corrugated tin roof. Houses are built on top of each other, with winding narrow footpaths snaking down to a local market. A small minority of Haitians have access to electricity; access to running water is even less common. Outside of the capital, the traditional *lakou* form of housing survives. The *lakou* is a compound built around a courtyard where the family eats, cooks, braids girls' hair, or takes bucket baths. Surrounding this courtyard is a ring of small one-room sleeping rooms made of mud and rock, wood logs, banana leaves, or cement.

Dating and Marriage. Although young Haitians socialize in groups, they do not usually begin dating until their late teens, when they finish school. Young people are free to choose their spouses; most parents do not greatly influence dating or marriage. When dating, the man will visit the woman at her home to become familiar with her parents and family members. Cou-

ples like movies, dancing, or other social events. Typically, urban couples have a church wedding followed by an evening reception. Receptions are usually held in private homes, where guests eat, dance, and socialize until late in the evening. In rural areas, a couple will not officially marry until they can afford a big wedding. They live together and have children as if married until they save enough money for the wedding.

Life Cycle. Celebrations of births are joyful, but Haitians are careful not to be seen as boastful in a country where so many children die before the age of five. Once children survive their first years, they are given a nickname that everyone outside of official institutions will call them by. Baptism and First Communion are significant rituals. Children are dressed in nice clothes. Family, friends, and neighbors gather to celebrate with a large meal, including some meat if the family can afford it. People are seen as adults when they have children of their own. Motherhood is so valued that some single women will pretend to have a child in order to fit into their peer group.

Because of Haiti's low life expectancy, elders—especially those who reach the age of 50 or above—are revered. Given the respect for ancestors in Haitian culture, even poor families will make an effort to have a proper funeral. Funeral processions include a single car and mourners, dressed in black, led by a marching band. Traditional cemeteries contain brightly colored tombs, some larger than housing for the living. Food and other offerings—such as *kleren* (an alcoholic drink made from cane juice)—are often placed on the tombs. People sometimes pour *kleren* and rum onto the ground as offerings to ancestors.

Diet. Haitians usually eat rice and beans every day, although a main meal usually also includes meat, salad, and a vegetable. Rice and corn are staple grains. Spicy foods are most popular. *Piman zwazo* (small hot pimentos) and garlic are often added to dishes. Meat is marinated in sauces with ingredients such as sour orange juice, lemon juice, and hot peppers. For breakfast, one might eat the traditional urban fare of coffee, herring with plantains and avocados, corn with codfish, or liver with plantains. A lighter breakfast consists of bread, butter, and jam with coffee. A favorite daytime snack might be bread and butter or pastries. Pork is the most commonly eaten meat, but Haitians also eat goat, chicken, guinea pig, and seafood (fish, shrimp, conch, crab, etc.). Meat-filled pastries are favorite snacks. Eggplant, yams, sweet potatoes, and a variety of fruits round out the diet. Haiti is especially known for its fresh-pressed juices made from passion fruit, oranges, *chadèk* (grapefruit), cherries, papaya, *zikak*, *grenadya*, and other fruits.

Recreation. Most Haitians have access to radios, and people generally listen to music and news throughout the day. A growing number of urban families are able to afford a television in their homes. Few people own VCRs, but they can watch videos at television stores. Haitian music videos are favored.

The most popular sport is soccer. Streets are empty if an important regional or world match is being televised. Children—both boys and girls—begin to play soccer at an early age. Leagues are organized throughout the country. Adult soccer stars are extremely popular among people of all ages. Men enjoy cockfights, usually held on Sunday afternoon. They also spend hours playing dominoes and cards.

The Arts. Music and dancing are integral to everyday life. Disco, reggae, and *konpa* (a contemporary version of big band music played in the United States during the 1940s) are popular in cities. *Meringue*, a mixture of African rhythms and European music, is also popular. Urban residents enjoy a variety of

Haiti

North American music. Haitian artists and sculptors are known for their unique images and striking colors. One popular art form is sculpture made from cut, pounded, and painted scrap metal. *Tap-taps*—brightly painted pickup trucks fitted with benches and covered tops—are both a means of transportation and traveling art. Many artists choose Haitian history or daily life for their subjects. Nature is also an important theme. Painted screens, papier-mâché art, wood carvings, basketwork, pottery, and painted wooden boxes are prominent crafts.

Oral literature is abundant and includes songs, proverbs, and riddles. Storytellers carefully craft their performance, acting out the story with their voice. There is also a vibrant tradition of Haitian literature, mostly written in French, although Creole is now commonly used.

Holidays. Haiti's national holidays include New Year's, which is also Independence Day; National Heroes Day (2 Jan.); Constitution Day (29 Mar.); Labor, or Agriculture, Day (1 May); Easter; Flag Day (18 May); *Fête Dieu*, which marks the institution of the sacrament or communion (first Thursday in June); and Christmas. Freedom from the Duvalier dictatorship is celebrated on 7 February. On New Year's Day, Haitian people traditionally visit their parents and friends to wish them well in the new year.

Carnaval, held before the Catholic Lent, is a festive time for dancing and parades. People prepare for the holiday for weeks in advance; beginning just after New Year's, pre-*Carnaval* activities occur every Sunday. On the holiday itself, people awaiting the main parade dance to music they play on their own portable stereos. The partying continues all night and into the early morning hours for two or three days. Stores are open only in the morning on these days.

Various Catholic feasts are also marked but are not necessarily public holidays. *Fèt Gede* (2 Nov.) honors the dead, who are highly venerated in Haitian culture. Each village or town has a holiday for the local patron saint, celebrated with a morning mass, daytime festival, and evening ball. Some of these festivals are very large, such as the *Fête de Notre Dame*. From mid-January to Easter, local bands known as *Rara* dance and perform in the streets. The holiday *Rara* is a more traditional version of *Carnaval*, which is not really celebrated in the countryside.

SOCIETY

Government. The Republic of Haiti is divided into 10 departments (provinces), but the central government has most control over political affairs. The president, currently René Préval, is head of state, and the prime minister (currently Michèle Pierre-Louis) is head of government. Haiti has a bicameral parliament, with a 30-seat Senate and a 99-seat Chamber of Deputies. The voting age is 18.

Economy. Haiti's economy is based on agriculture, which employs about two-thirds of the workforce. Large farms are rare, so production quantities are small. Around 80 percent of all Haitians live in poverty. Real wages have not risen in a generation. The most important cash crops include coffee, cacao, and sugar. However, little is actually exported, and international aid is necessary to develop future agricultural potential. Industrial activity is minimal, geared mostly for domestic needs (cement, sugar refining, etc.). A few industries make toys and clothing for export. The economy is experiencing lit-

POPULATION & AREA

Population	8,924,553 (rank=89)
Area, sq. mi.	10,714 (rank=142)
Area, sq. km.	27,750

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	146 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$1,663
Adult literacy rate	57% (male); 57% (female)
Infant mortality rate	84 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	58 (male); 61 (female)

tle to no growth. Corruption, high unemployment, political instability, and inefficient state enterprises are major barriers to additional development. The government is pressured to privatize some state companies, but the process is slow and unpopular. Haiti's currency is the *gourde* (HTG).

Transportation and Communications. For short distances, most Haitians travel by foot. In cities, they may also ride buses, taxis, or a colorful *tap-tap*, which travels fixed routes but not on a fixed schedule. Intercity transportation is made by bus, boat, or plane. Few people own private cars.

Middle- and upper-income urban homes have phones. Otherwise, people go to a central telephone office. Phone booths are rare because of vandalism. In urban areas, a growing number of people use cell phones and frequent internet cafes. The postal system is generally reliable but not protected against theft. A person can post a message on certain radio stations or send a written message via truck drivers. The drivers drop the messages at a store on their way and recipients can retrieve them. Haiti has two daily newspapers, about two hundred radio stations, and several television stations.

Education. Haiti's school system is patterned after the French model, with kindergarten, primary school that lasts six years, and secondary school that lasts seven years. Many urban dwellers send their children to private schools, even though tuition can be a burden. In fact, roughly 80 percent of all schools are private. In Port-au-Prince especially, daily schooling is often interrupted by street demonstrations. Because these events can be violent, parents tend to keep children home whenever a protest is announced or anticipated.

Students who complete secondary school may pursue higher education at a university or other private institutions. The country's main university is the State University of Haiti. Students who do not complete their education often work on family farms, especially in rural areas.

Health. Haiti's national health system is unable to meet the needs of most people due to the lack of funds, staff, and modern equipment. Malaria, hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, dengue fever, and other diseases combine with malnutrition to keep life expectancy rates low and infant mortality rates high. Most children do not receive proper vaccinations. Proper sanitation and clean water are also lacking.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information. Embassy of the Republic of Haiti, 2311 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 332-4090; web site www.haiti.org.

CultureGrams[™]
People. The World. You.

ProQuest
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
Fax: 1.800.864.0019
www.culturegrams.com