

Overview of Haiti

Haiti has a striking landscape of hills, mountains and deep valleys, and is culturally distinct from the Dominican Republic, even though the two countries share the island of Hispaniola. The overwhelming majority of Haitians are of Afro-Caribbean ancestry, while the Dominican Republic is far more diverse demographically. Haitians have also developed a number of unique cultural and linguistic trends that have been highly influenced by the nation's African heritage. Indeed, some say Haiti is really a West African country located in the Caribbean.

Known as 'the pearl of the Caribbean', Haiti was once among France's richest colonies. Today, it endures widespread crime, poverty and civil disturbance. What's more, a catastrophic earthquake struck the country in January 2010, killing nearly 300,000 people and devastating local infrastructure. It destroyed many major landmarks in Port-au-Prince, including the Presidential Palace, Port-au-Prince Cathedral, and the National Assembly building. Hospitals, transport facilities and communication systems remain inadequate.

The fact that dozens of sleek cruise liners still visit a corner of Haiti is a beacon of hope for future tourism. The glittering white liners head out from Miami and deliver passengers to the cordoned off port of Labadee. The destination lies adjacent to Haiti's colourful city of Cap-Haitien. Visitors are safe to shop for souvenirs, sample local cuisine and generally enjoy themselves on Haiti's lovely northern coastline. Cap-Haitien is arguably preferable to Port-au-Prince as a tourist destination, as it suffered little damage in 2010.

Though most governments discourage travel to Haiti, intrepid visitors will find surviving natural beauty and many exciting volunteer opportunities. Foreign aid and local ingenuity are steadily improving conditions, but travellers will struggle to explore the country if they aren't on a cruise or part of a volunteer programme.

Key Facts

Language:

The two official languages of Haiti are Haitian Creole and French. English is largely spoken in the capital and at Labadee cruise port.

Passport/Visa:

All foreign passengers to Haiti require a valid passport, onward or return tickets, and all necessary travel documentation for their next destination. People of Haitian origin do not require a visa. A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required if arriving from or transiting through an infected area. It is highly recommended that travellers' passports have at least six months' validity remaining after the intended date of departure from their travel destination. Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

Currency:

The official currency is the Haitian gourde (HTG), but US dollars are widely accepted. Travellers can use credit cards at major hotels and some shops, though there is a risk of credit card cloning and theft. ATMs are scarce outside of Port-au-Prince.

Electricity:

110 volts, 60HZ. The plugs in use are the eastern type with two flat, parallel prongs or with two flat, parallel prongs and a third round pin below (Type A and B).

Travel to Haiti

Overview

Although Haiti is bogged down by a history of violence and natural disaster, it is still a beautiful country with a tropical climate, white-sand beaches, and lush jungle vegetation. It also has an interesting history. Thousands of cruise passengers enjoy the safe tourist haven of Labadee, and visitors who are able to venture beyond this affluent enclave can expect to encounter a few wonderful attractions.

Labadee definitely tops the list of what to see and do in Haiti, though the picturesque resort has come under some fire recently for exploiting the country's natural assets and tourism potential with little benefit to the local community beyond its high fences. For many, however, this little piece of Haitian heaven is a safe and lovely stop-off point and a chance to enjoy the colourful craft markets in the village of Labadee.

Many governments still advise against tourist travel to Port-au-Prince (especially the slum areas of the city), as the capital is unfortunately the epicentre of crime and violence in the country. Fairly close to the sprawling Port-au-Prince is the far smaller port city of Jacmel, a historic and charming place to visit. In Jacmel tourists will find a community struggling to recover from the 2010 earthquake, but also captivating 19th-century architecture, white-sand beaches, and a proud cultural scene that celebrates local music and art. The glorious turquoise pools and waterfalls at Bassin Bleu, close to Jacmel, delight visitors, and the imposing, UNESCO-certified Citadelle Laferriere is an amazing excursion. Haiti is not an easy country to get around as the infrastructure is poor, but there are rewards awaiting those who do.

Climate in Haiti

Haiti enjoys a tropical climate and the weather is generally hot and humid, with sultry, warm nights. Rainfall is variable between regions and the rainy season is from April to November. There are often severe storms during the hurricane season, between June and October, when there is the risk of flooding, landslides and hurricanes.

The seasons are not particularly distinct but the best time to travel to Haiti is between November and March to avoid the rainy periods. Between November and March, which is technically winter in Haiti, daytime temperatures range from 70F to 80F (23C to 32C) and nights are cooler at 60F to 70F (15C to 27C). In the summer months, it is significantly hotter. Partly due to its problem with deforestation, Haiti can experience extremes of weather, particularly in the form of flooding but occasionally through severe droughts as well.

Haiti is mountainous and weather varies according to altitude, with the hilly regions always a bit cooler than the coast. As the mountains can get cold at night, travellers should have warm clothes no matter what time of year they explore these areas.

Health Notes when travelling to Haiti

Visitors should take malaria medication, and protect themselves as far as possible from mosquito bites with insect repellent and mosquito nets. Chikungunya and dengue fever also occur in the region.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required for those arriving from a country where there is a risk of infection, and hepatitis A and B, typhoid, polio, and MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccinations are recommended. Travellers who could expose themselves to animal bites should consider a rabies vaccination.

Visitors should only drink boiled or bottled water and avoid ice in drinks, as cholera is present across the country. Medical facilities in Port-au-Prince are of poor quality, and are virtually non-existent elsewhere in Haiti, so travel health insurance with evacuation cover is essential. It is advisable to bring all required medications from home. If visitors are travelling with prescribed medications, they should be sure to carry a prescription and doctor's note detailing what the medications are for and why they are needed.

Safety Notes when travelling to Haiti

Most tourists choose not to venture beyond the safe resort area of Labadee, where the port has been enclosed to protect visitors. The security situation is unpredictable throughout the rest of the destination, and violent crime is common. Tourists and expats will need to consider the threat of armed robbery, carjacking, assault and kidnapping, and the risk increases after dark and in isolated areas. Visitors should be alert to their surroundings and think carefully about security at their hotel. They should also travel with someone who speaks the local creole, avoid showing signs of wealth and have someone meet them at the airport when they land. Haiti suffers sporadic, unpredictable and sometimes violent protests, roadblocks and demonstrations.

Customs in Haiti

A smile goes a long way in Haiti and, while people might think Haitians are solemn at first glance, most quickly warm up to visitors. Haitians are proud people despite their poor circumstances and appreciate being treated with respect. It is advisable to show willingness to learn a few basic Creole phrases, and to ask permission before taking pictures of locals. In rural areas it is considered indecent for women to have bare legs or shoulders, and modesty is encouraged when it comes to clothing in general.

Duty Free in Haiti

The duty free allowance for goods brought into Haiti is 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars or 1kg of tobacco, 1 litre of spirits, a small quantity of perfume and new goods for personal use up to a value of HTG 2,500.

Doing Business in Haiti

As Haiti is economically depressed and one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, few business visitors will have cause to travel there. Those who do should consider hiring a translator to ensure smooth communication. Business hours are generally from 8am to 4pm.

Communication in Haiti

The international dialling code for Haiti is +509. Communications infrastructure is poor, but a mobile network is available.

Tipping in Haiti

Restaurant staff in Haiti should be tipped around 10 percent of the bill. Taxi drivers can be given a discretionary tip if they are helpful and efficient. Most Haitians don't tip, but it is customary to tip in tourist locations and all gratuities are graciously accepted.

Passport/Visa Note

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Entry Requirements

Entry requirements for Americans:

US citizens must have a passport that is valid for duration of intended stay in Haiti. A visa is not required for stays of up to three months.

Entry requirements for Canadians:

Canadian citizens must have a passport that is valid for duration of intended stay in Haiti. A visa is not required for stays of up to three months.

Entry requirements for UK nationals:

British citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond the duration of intended stay in Haiti. A visa is not required for stays of up to three months.

Entry requirements for Australians:

Australian citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond period of intended stay in Haiti. A visa is not required for stays of up to three months.

Entry requirements for Irish nationals:

Irish citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond period of intended stay in Haiti. A visa is not required for stays of up to three months.

Entry requirements for New Zealanders:

New Zealand citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond period of intended stay in Haiti. A visa is not required for stays of up to three months.

Entry requirements for South Africans:

South African citizens must have a passport that is valid for six months beyond period of intended stay in Haiti. A visa is not required for stays of up to three months.

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Haiti Embassies

In the United States:

Embassy of Haiti, Washington DC, United States: +1 202 332 4090

In Canada:

Embassy of Haiti, Ottawa, Canada: +1 613 238 1628/1629

In the United Kingdom:

Embassy of Haiti, London, United Kingdom: +44 20 3771 1427

In Australia:

Embassy of Trinidad and Tobago, Sydney, Australia (responsible for Haiti): +61 2 9327 6639

In South Africa:

Embassy of Haiti in South Africa: +27 12 342 0192; +27 12 432 0980

Foreign Embassies in Haiti

American Embassy

United States Embassy, Port-au-Prince: +509 2229 8000.

Canadian Embassy

Canadian Embassy, Port-au-Prince: +509 2812 9000

British Embassy

British Embassy, Port-au-Prince: + 509 2812 9191

Australian Embassy

Australian High Commission, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago (also responsible for Haiti): +1 868 822 5450

South African Embassy

South African High Commission, Kingston, Jamaica (also responsible for Haiti): +1 876 620 4840.

Currency

The official currency is the Haitian gourde (HTG), but US dollars are widely accepted. Travellers can use credit cards at major hotels and some shops, though there is a risk of credit card cloning and theft. ATMs are scarce outside of Port-au-Prince.

Overview of the Attractions in Haiti

Although Haiti is bogged down by a history of violence and natural disaster, it is still a beautiful country with a tropical climate, white-sand beaches, and lush jungle vegetation. It also has an interesting history. Thousands of cruise passengers enjoy the safe tourist haven of Labadee, and visitors who are able to venture beyond this affluent enclave can expect to encounter a few wonderful attractions.

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Public Holidays in Haiti