



Dominican Republic 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Murder; Rape/Sexual Violence; Fraud; Financial Security; Riots/Civil Unrest; Hurricanes; Landslides and mudslides; Floods; Earthquakes; Kidnapping; Drug Trafficking; Disease Outbreak

Western Hemisphere > Dominican Republic; Western Hemisphere > Dominican Republic > Santo Domingo

4/20/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Critical

Crime Threats

The 2015 crime statistics from the national police list the cities where the majority of reported criminal acts occurred by category.

Preliminary crime statistics for 2015 reveal that the five highest ranking provinces for homicide in 2015 were: Santo Domingo City (369), Santo Domingo National District (208), Santiago (205), San Cristobal (95), and La Vega (67).

The top five provinces for reported robberies were: Santo Domingo City, Santo Domingo National District, Santiago, La Vega, and San Cristóbal. The top five National District neighborhoods were: Arroyo Hondo, Gazcue, Villa Consuelo, Villa Juana and Zona

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Universitaria.

The highest incidents of sexual assault occurred in the provinces of Santo Domingo, San Cristobal, Peravia, and La Vega. Anecdotal reports provided to the U.S. Embassy show a marked increase in the use of date-rape drugs in the commission of sexual assaults.

The wide availability of weapons, the use of drugs, and the weak criminal justice system all contribute to the high level of criminality in the country. Crime is generally not violent if the victim cooperates; however, an assailant will not hesitate to use violence if the victim resists. The crime situation is exacerbated by the lack of law enforcement resources, poorly paid and poorly trained police officers, and rampant corruption.

The most common type of crime is the drive-by robbery that is normally performed by one or two assailants (usually male) on a motorcycle, scooter, or even a bicycle. The assailant will drive up to their potential victim and grab anything that is in arm's reach. Often, they will stop, one will disembark, point a handgun at the victim, and demand an item. Although armed assaults are slightly more frequent during hours of darkness and when victims travel by foot, they can occur while the victim is in a vehicle stopped at a traffic light and often during the day.

During the holiday season (November-January) and especially during Carnival (February), the overall level of crime, especially thefts and robberies, tends to rise.

The country faces the challenge of organized crime, which involves a variety of activities, including drug trafficking and money laundering.

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Cybersecurity Issues

Fraud schemes, particularly credit card fraud, continue to occur. More sophisticated cyber crimes are not common, though the police's capability to combat it is poor.

The cyber fraud scheme most attributed to the Dominican Republic does not actually take place in the country. The "Grandparents Scam" is when someone pretending to be a police officer or a representative from the U.S. Embassy calls an elderly relative of a U.S. citizen claiming to have arrested their young U.S. citizen relative. They sound credible and pressure the elderly relative to wire money for "bond" or "damages" or "legal fees." The callback number is frequently answered by someone claiming to be a U.S. Embassy representative. Due to the high number of U.S. tourists that visit the Dominican Republic, it is often used as the country in which the purported incident is said to be occurring. Based on U.S. Embassy investigations, the callers are not based in the Dominican Republic, nor does the wired money end up in the Dominican Republic. But the U.S. Embassy receives several calls per week from U.S.-based victims of the scam.

Areas of Concern

If traveling overland between the Dominican Republic and Haiti or to the border region, it is highly recommended to consult the Country Specific Information Sheet for Haiti, as well as the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince website for information about travel conditions in Haiti. The border areas are often regions in which nationalistic tensions can result in violence and where black U.S. citizens may be delayed at checkpoints while Dominican authorities review their

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passports and question their purpose of travel. Such situations should be brought to the attention of the U.S. Embassy for quick resolution.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Avoid renting vehicles or driving unless familiar with the local traffic laws and customs. For those planning to self-drive, offensive and defensive driving skills are a necessity. Although traffic laws are similar to those in the U.S., a lack of adequate traffic controls and enforcement result in hostile driving conditions and frequent car accidents. Drivers are commonly aggressive and erratic, often failing to yield the right-of-way or engaging in road rage. According to the 2015 Global Status report on Road Safety issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Dominican Republic has the 12-most dangerous roads in the world, with 29.4 people perishing in traffic accidents each year for every 100,000 residents. It ranks the highest in Latin America.

Local laws require the use of seat belts, the use of hands-free cellular devices while driving, and the use of helmets by motorcyclists. Police conduct random stops of vehicles in order to check documentation. Individuals found to be violating the law can be delayed, fined or asked to pay a "fee" on the spot.

Pedestrians tend to step out into traffic without regard to corners, crosswalks, or traffic signals. The lack of street lighting is notable and contributes to pedestrian and vehicular

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deaths. Pedestrians do not have the right-of-way, so walking along or crossing busy streets can be very dangerous, even in crosswalks, at intersections with traffic lights, or where traffic police are present.

Travel at night on intercity highways and in rural areas is not recommended due to animals on the road, poor road conditions, and vehicles being driven at excessive speeds often with malfunctioning head/taillights. Rolling blackouts within the urban and rural areas increase the danger of night travel.

Although the Dominican Republic criminalizes driving under the influence of alcohol, enforcement is non-existent. Traffic accidents related to driving under the influence often result in serious injury/death. This is especially the case during the holiday season and when commercial vehicles are involved.

Local law requires that a driver be taken into custody when an accident results in serious injury/death, even if the driver is insured and appears not to have been at fault. Only the driver will be taken into custody. The minimum detention period is 48 hours; however, detentions frequently last until a judicial decision is reached (often weeks or months) or until a waiver is signed by the injured party (usually as the result of a settlement).

Visitors may want to consider hiring a driver during their stay in lieu of driving themselves. Licensed drivers who are familiar with local road conditions can be obtained through local car rental and travel agencies.

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Public Transportation Conditions

For intercity travel, consider using one of the more reputable tourist bus companies, and for travel within the city, hotel and call-ahead or smartphone-app based taxi services are recommended. For safety reasons, it is suggested to avoid using public transportation, such as route taxis ("carros públicos") and urban buses ("guaguas").

Aviation/Airport Conditions

The Dominican Republic has five international airports that serve the U.S: Puerto Plata, Punta Cana, Samana, La Romana, and Santo Domingo. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration assesses through its International Aviation Safety Program that the Dominican Republic meets International Civil Aviation standards. The last reported aviation incident occurred on February 6, 1996, when a Virgin Air Boeing 757 crashed near Puerto Plata resulting in the death of 189 individuals. Airports are modernizing, and airport security is certified by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA), permitting direct flights to the U.S.

Other Travel Conditions

As gasoline prices remain at a premium, many people convert their vehicles to propane gas, which is a cheaper fuel. The nozzles of the tanks that hold propane tanks are easily ruptured in an accident. The result of a rupture is often a massive explosion, which usually kills or

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severely burns the occupants of the vehicles and any bystanders.

Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There are no known organized, domestic terrorist groups. Santo Domingo did experience its first incident of domestic terrorism in October 2014 when a male ignited an incendiary device on a crowded subway car, killing one person and injuring dozens. The Dominican Republic is an integral part of the Caribbean with several international airports and, as such, is a likely transit point for extremists from within the region, Africa, and Europe.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

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Politically-motivated protests, demonstrations, and general strikes occur periodically, particularly during general election years. Previous political demonstrations have sometimes turned violent, with participants rioting and erecting roadblocks.

Civil unrest has become a common occurrence in the last several years due to the lack of adequate electricity, water resources, and the public opinion from certain groups that the government is not actively protecting the national patrimony. Demonstrations and strikes have occurred outside of Santo Domingo without advance notice and have occasionally turned violent.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

The Dominican Republic is a multi-ethnic/religious country, and a harmonious relationship generally exists between all groups. Occasionally, inter-ethnic disputes may arise due more to socio-economic pressures than an outright ethnic conflict or clash of religious ideologies.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

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The Dominican Republic is located in the center of the Antillean archipelago that places the island in the pathway of severe weather: hurricanes, tropical storms, tropical depressions, earthquakes, floods, and droughts. Visitors need to be aware that many buildings are not in compliance with U.S. hurricane and seismic codes.

The largest reoccurring natural disaster threat is hurricanes, resultant landslides, and flooding in low lying and coastal areas that are also susceptible to the influence of tidal surge. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Atlantic hurricane season (June 1-November 30) on average encompasses over 97 percent of reported tropical activity in the Atlantic basin.

The Dominican Republic lies on several fault lines running through the Caribbean. Of particular note is the Submarine Fault between Dominican Republic and Guadeloupe. Large earthquakes of magnitude 8.5 to 9.0 could occur, rupturing the 1,000-kilometer length of this fault.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

The potential exists for industrial accidents involving large infrastructure and industrial facilities containing hazardous materials, especially after a natural disaster. Pollution of lakes and rivers is also a major environmental problem.

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Privacy Concerns

Hotel rooms and telephones are generally safe to use; however, your business should be conducted with discretion to avoid the loss of proprietary information.

Drug-related Crimes

Although the country is not a center of drug production, the Dominican Republic continues to be a transit zone for drugs entering the U.S. and Europe. Drugs are frequently channeled from Mexico and South America, either by aircraft or through maritime platforms. While cocaine is the most significant drug threat, hashish, heroin, and designer drugs are also readily available.

On May 30, 1988, the Dominican Congress approved Law 50-88 dealing with narcotic drugs. It has been diligently enforced since its passage. Under this law, the possession of any quantity of marijuana (even with a U.S. prescription), cocaine, hallucinogens, barbiturates, amphetamines, or other narcotic drugs is a punishable offense. Each offender is categorized according to the quantity of the drugs found in his/her possession and must stand trial in a "Court of First Instance." The judicial process may last several years. During the pre-trial period, a defendant remains incarcerated in most cases. The severity of this law was intended to keep the country safe from criminal activities commonly associated with the trafficking, cultivation, and manufacture of narcotics. The Dominican Republic has empowered the police and military forces to undertake vigorous efforts to combat the threat from narcotic drugs. The law was enacted to prevent the Dominican Republic from becoming a major transit point in the

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criminal trade of drugs.

Kidnapping Threat

U.S. citizens of Dominican descent are occasionally targets of kidnapping-for-ransom, in which families in the U.S. are asked to pay a large sum of money to secure the release of the abducted individual. Victims of reported cases include business persons, family members, and citizens. Some victims have reported that they were abducted by men in police uniforms or similar clothing and were told that their identity needed to be verified. Victims are taken and held from a few hours to a couple of days. During that time, abductors contact the family members and demand large sums of money for the release of their loved ones.

More common, but still relatively rare, are “express kidnappings” where people are held at gunpoint and forced to withdraw money from several ATMs.

Police Response

Corruption and official misconduct remains a serious concern. As per the mandate of law 94-02, Internal Affairs within the police works to prevent, investigate, monitor, control, and recommend corrective actions for any improper conduct. Although Internal Affairs investigations result in the termination of hundreds of police officers per year, they are under-resourced and unable to make a significant dent in the level of police corruption.

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Visitors are subject to local laws. The judicial process can last several years, which may result in lengthy pre-trial detainment in a local jail. Anyone entering the Dominican Republic, regardless of nationality, is subject to the provisions of Law 50-88. Accordingly, U.S. citizens are subject to punishment under the strict anti-drug measures.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Should one be arrested, here are the expected phases of the national criminal procedures:

PHASE ONE

Arrest: According to the Constitution, a person detained/arrested by the police may be held without charges for up to 48 hours. During this period, the prosecutor and the police conduct an initial investigation of the case.

Right to an Attorney: A detainee is typically questioned as part of the investigation by the police. According to local law, a detainee is entitled to have an attorney present during any questioning, any hearings, or trials. If the detainee cannot afford an attorney, the government will provide a public defender upon request. The detainee also has the right to remain silent.

Habeas Corpus: According to the Constitution, any person who is detained for more than 48 hours without being formally charged is entitled to request a hearing of habeas corpus, a release from prison while awaiting trial, but the defendant is required to remain in the country until the charges are finally resolved.

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PHASE TWO

The District Attorney sends the case to a coordinating judge, who will assign one of the investigating judges to conduct a preliminary investigation. This judge will examine the evidence that is presented by the District Attorney, and a determination will be made whether the detainee should remain in custody. Should the judge determine that there is sufficient evidence to detain, a date for a preliminary hearing, typically three months to one year, will be set. A defendant may request bail at any time during this process.

PHASE THREE

At a preliminary hearing, the investigating judge will hear evidence and make a decision on whether grave, sufficient, and corroborating evidence of guilt exists. If so, the detainee remains in custody, and the case is assigned to a First Instance Court.

PHASE FOUR

The First Instance Court is assigned the case, and a court date is set for trial. The trial generally proceeds in the following sequence:

- Judge questions the prisoner to see if the testimony conforms to the statements in the documents;
- The prosecuting attorney may direct questions to the prisoner;
- The defense may ask further questions, call witnesses, and present defense arguments;
- The prosecuting attorney delivers a summation; and
- The trial is concluded and the defendant remains in custody pending rendering of a sentence.

PHASE FIVE

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If the defendant is found guilty, the detainee has 10 days to appeal. If the case is appealed, the prisoner is incarcerated until a hearing is set before a five- or three-judge court of appeal.

If arrested or harassed, contact the U.S. Embassy's American Citizens Services section at (809) 567-7775.

Crime Victim Assistance

A prompt police response to reported incidents is normally limited due to local traffic conditions and available resources. However, since 2014, the Santo Domingo National District has benefited from the new '911' call center that has dramatically improved response times for police, ambulances, and fire fighters. Expansion to Santiago (with coverage extending to Puerto Planta) is expected to be complete by the third quarter of 2016.

The Dominican Republic has a specialized military police force (CESTUR) to assist tourists and provide first responder-type assistance to tourists. If a visitor is a victim of a crime, the CESTUR will help them to get to a police station, file a police report, and seek further assistance. However, Americans who are victims of a crime should contact American Citizens Services as soon as possible.

Santo Domingo District Emergency Telephone Number: 911

U.S. Embassy, American Citizen Services: (809) 567-7775

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Police/Security Agencies

The Constitution was changed on January 26, 2010, to separate the powers of the National Police and the military. This constitutional change specifically identifies the military's responsibility to maintain the country's sovereignty, leaving the National Police to handle the country's internal security and the protection of its citizens (to include residents, visitors, and diplomats). In 2014, however, certain functions (the tourist police (CESTUR), the border authorities (CESFRONT), and the airport security authorities (CESAC)) returned to the military. CESTUR is a cooperative effort between the National Police, Secretary of the Armed Forces, and the Secretary of Tourism but remains under the ultimate purview of the Minister of Defense.

The National Police remain the main internal security force and the only agency authorized to conduct investigations.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care in Santo Domingo is adequate for most problems. Appointments are generally easy to obtain and can be scheduled for the same week. Payment for services is expected at the time of the appointment (or when the ambulance arrives). Ambulance response times range from 10-30 minutes (with the lower end being for private ambulances and the higher end, "911". Recommended private ambulance services include:

Movimed: (809) 532-0000 (in Santo Domingo)

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Pro Med: (809) 948-7200 (in Santo Domingo)

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

Santo Domingo

Clínica Abreu, tel: (809) 688-4411

Clínica Abel González, tel: (809) 227-2235

CEDIMAT, tel: (809) 565-9989

Plaza de la Salud, tel: (809) 565-7477

Santiago

Clínica Corominas, tel: (809) 508-1171

Puerto Plata

Centro Médico Bournigal, tel: (809) 586-2342

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La Romana

Centro Médico Central Romana, tel: (809) 532-3333

Bávaro/Punta Cana

Centro Medico Punta Cana, tel: (809) 552-1506

Hospiten Bávaro, tel: (809) 686-1414

Recommended Insurance Posture

U.S. insurance plans are not accepted nor will claims be filed for the traveler.

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

With an active presence of mosquitos that transmit dengue fever, Zika virus, and chikungunya, the CDC recommends people take precautions while traveling to the Dominican Republic. For further country specific health guidance please visit: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/dominican-republic.htm>.

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OSAC Country Council Information

The RSO developed its OSAC Country Council program in October 2004, and the Embassy officially formalized its OSAC Country Council on November 21, 2009. The Country Council represents over 60 major U.S. companies from a varied number of industries, who meet on a quarterly basis. The Council takes an active role engaging issues of crime and security within the Dominican Republic. These take the form of security reports, outreach to public officials for speaking engagements, training, and briefing seminars, and an extensive email network to promote ideas and facilitate the exchange of information and contacts. Country Council information can be found at: www.osac.gov/countrycouncils. Point of contact for the Santo Domingo OSAC Council is Philippe G. Furstenberg, Regional Security Officer, at (809) 368-7239 or FurstenbergP@state.gov. To reach OSAC's Western Hemisphere team, please email OSACWHA@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

The U.S. Embassy is located at 57 Avenida República de Colombia, Arroyo Hondo, Santo Domingo, D.R.

Hours of Operation: 0800-1645 (8:00am until 4:45pm) Mon-Fri.

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Embassy Contact Numbers

Main tel: (809) 567-7775 (24 hours/day)

Regional Security Office: (809) 368-7239

Embassy Operator: (809) 567-7775

American Citizens Services: (809) 567-7775

Marine Post One: (809) 368-7777

Website: <http://santodomingo.usembassy.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

American citizens are encouraged to register their visits to the country on the State Department website under the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) in order to better assist you during an emergency.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

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Scams

Criminals have been known to install equipment that captures personal bank information (“skimmers”) from legitimate bank ATMs or contact someone on the inside that has access to card and personal identification (PIN) numbers. Always be aware of passersby when using an ATM and guard the key pad when entering the PIN so others cannot see the entry. Avoid using ATMs not located in hotels, banks, or malls to withdraw cash

Be alert to scams involving an unknown person spilling a drink/food on clothing. An accomplice may be preparing to steal wallets, purses, or briefcases.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

Visitors are reminded to maintain a high level of vigilance and to take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness. Be alert for persons watching your movements. Be cautious when entering public bathrooms. Valuables should normally be left at home. Purse snatchers and briefcase thieves are known to work hotel bars and restaurants, waiting for guests to place these items on chairs or under tables. Keep items in view or in touch. Pools or beaches are attractive areas for thieves. The Regional Security Office (RSO) strongly urges all Americans to cooperate if confronted with any type of weapon during the commission of a crime.

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Invest in a good city map and or use smartphone GPS. Note significant points (hotels, embassies, police stations). Be aware of your surroundings. Look up and down the street before exiting a building. Avoid jogging/walking in an unfamiliar city or, if you must run outside, consider using the more secure park called "the Botanical Gardens" or the "Mirador del Sur" park main road, which the police close for bikers and runners between 6-9 am and 5-8 pm. If one walks, be aware of the traffic patterns when crossing public streets. Pedestrians have been seriously injured by failing to understand local traffic conditions.

Keep a copy of your passport and keep the original in the hotel safe. Only relinquish it if you are required to identify yourself to local authorities for any reason. Keep hotel room keys with you, if possible. Leave valuables in the hotel, but carry a token sum to placate violent thieves. At night, secure passports and other valuables; the best way to protect them is to secure them in your local offices or the hotel room safe. Do not divulge the name of your hotel or room number to strangers. Speak with the bellman, concierge, and front desk regarding safe areas around the city to dine or sight see. Ask about local customs and which taxi companies to use or avoid.

The RSO strongly urges that travelers contact their financial institution before scheduled travel to provide them with dates and locations of the visit and limit the amount of money that can be withdrawn. Only carry cards that are absolutely needed, such as a credit card, in lieu of a debit card. It is recommended that travelers save receipts of purchases. In cases of fraud, immediately contact your financial institution and file a report. Fraudulent charges may not appear until well after the return home. If making credit/debit card transactions, check your accounts periodically online or through contacting the institution directly to clarify there are no erroneous charges on your account.

To avoid becoming a victim of a drive-by robbery, try to avoid outwardly displaying any items of value while walking. Always remain aware of the surroundings and be alert for motorcycles

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and scooters approaching from any direction. If someone is approaching, duck into a store or move out of the way. If the assailant cannot get close enough, he will often not stop, although he may circle around and try again later.

Avoid providing too many details to strangers. Prostitutes, both men and women, take advantage of travelers through various ploys such as knock out drugs, the use of accomplices, and theft from the victim's room.

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