

HAITI'S HISTORY & CULTURE



(A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW)



*A HaitiHub Info Packet for everyone
committed to a more effective and
respectful way of working in Haiti*

Haiti's History and Culture Crash-Course

(A HaitiHub Info Packet – See www.haitihub.com for more)

Haiti Knowledge Cheat-Sheet

How Big and Where?

- Haiti is smaller than Maryland, geographically
- About 9.5 million people (same as Los Angeles County)
- Shares one island called "Hispaniola" with the Dominican Republic, located about 700 miles from Miami
- Western 1/3 of the island is Haiti, other 2/3 is the D.R.

Colonial Legacy

- The island where Haiti is located was named "**Hispaniola**" by Christopher **Columbus** who landed in what is now **Santo Domingo** (the capital of the Dominican Republic) in 1492
- Haiti is the only free republic born of a successful slave rebellion. Also the first black republic. This is a special point of pride for Haitians.
- A constant history of violence but NOT of poverty (for many years, in fact, Haiti was the richest European colony in the New World)

Religion

- Christian country: 80% **Catholic**, 15% **Protestant**
- However, **Voodoo** influences daily life and society in important ways

Age Demographics

- Young country: Median age is 21
- Life expectancy at birth is 62

Economy

- More than 2/3 of the workforce do not have formal jobs.
- Remittances make up 20% of GDP and are greater than income from exports. (Remittances come from significant populations of Haitians and Haitian Americans in **Miami**, **New York**, and **Boston**, as well as Haitians in **Canada**, **France**, and other **Caribbean nations**)

History of Foreign Influences in the Country

- Haiti was colonized by the Spanish and then the French.
- The United State occupied Haiti for about 2 decades starting 1915.
- Since 2004, a UN Peacekeeping force has maintained a permanent presence (mostly **Brazilian** and **Argentinean** but other coalition countries as well – **Paraguay**, and famously now, **Nepal** which has been identified as the source of a Cholera outbreak in Haiti where previously Cholera was never known)
- Since 2010, Haiti has **a higher concentration of NGO's per person than any other nation in the world**

Official Languages: French and Creole.

- French is spoken by about 5% of the population – it is often seen as a status symbol
- All schooling is done in French
- But Creole is spoken by 100% of Haitians

Haiti on All the Wrong Lists

- Poorest country in the Western Hemisphere
- Regularly at the top of Foreign Policy Magazine's **Failed States Index**
- Regularly at the top of Transparency International's **Corruption** Perceptions Index
- Regularly at the top of "**brain drain**" lists as well (percentage of educated professionals leaving the country)
- Over 90% deforested

The Positives

- Beautiful beaches – **Cap Haitian** in the North and **Labadie** which famously docks Royal Caribbean cruise ships, **Jacmel** in the South
- Mineral wealth. Estimated in 2012 that **\$20B** worth of gold, silver, and copper is in Haiti's north hills
- Historical Sites – forts from the time of piracy in the Caribbean
- Haitian food & produce – **tomatoes, avocados, mangos, coffee, rum**
- Music, art, oral tradition (proverbs), dance
- Haitians are entrepreneurial and motivated. An eager work force.
- There is a very high cultural value placed on **education**
- As a society, Haiti is extremely welcoming, hospitable, kind, funny, resilient.

Haiti vs. Dominican Republic (A Longer Case Study)

Comparing the 2 neighbors is a particularly effective way of understanding Haiti's history.

Today, Haiti and the D.R. are vastly different places:

Haiti	Dominican Republic
French Creole-speaking population of African descent	Spanish-speaking population of Latin descent
90% deforested (difference is clear in satellite images)	Forests and beaches much more intact
Persistent lack of foreign investment	You can go to a Burger King and a baseball game
Underdeveloped trade/export with other countries	World's #3 exporter of Avocados
Tourism industry stunted by national unrest	Tourism a primary driver of the D.R. economy
Appears on lists of failed states, corruption, brain drain	Ranks better across all quality of life indicators

Why is this?

Three main reasons help explain the differences we see today between the two nations: 1) Differences in colonial society, 2) Differences in becoming a nation, and 3) environmental differences.

I. Differences in Colonial Society

- France invested heavily in creating a **sugar cane plantation economy run by slave labor** in its western 1/3 of the island. Spain did not.

- During the 1700's the Spanish colony had:

- a) a small population
- b) few slaves
- c) and a small economy based on raising cattle and selling hides

- While the French colony had:

- a) a much larger population
- b) more slaves (23x more than the Spanish side)
- c) a proportionally much higher slave population (on French side, 9 of every 10 people were slaves)
- d) and a large economy based on sugar plantations

- The larger population in a smaller area (remember Haiti is 1/3 of the island) combined with environment, led to faster environmental decline, and more crowded cities.

II. Differences in Becoming A Nation & Haiti's Really Bad Timing

In 1804, Haiti's successful rebellion wiped out white slave owners & created the first black republic in the world.

- Remember, this is **more than 60 years before the United States abolishes slavery** after the American civil war!

- The U.S. in 1804 is very much a slave-based economy. **To Americans, the events in Haiti look terrifying.**

- The U.S. and European colonial powers **refuse to recognize Haiti, refuse to trade with Haiti, and support French-based sanctions**, including demands on Haiti to repay a huge debt for French losses of land and property (ironically, by "property" the French meant the former slaves who had fought for freedom)

Coming into statehood in the Americas in this way, at this time, **sets the stage for a long economic and developmental decline**. You can imagine that things might have been very different if Haiti gained its independence 60 or 70 years later when the US officially ended slavery in America with the 13th Amendment.

What's more, Haiti's leaders were understandably against the plantation system that was the foundation of slavery so they tried to dismantle it.

- They killed the French
- Broke up the plantations
- And made it illegal for foreigners to own land

These were all good things in distancing the country from its slave-economy past, but they were very bad for economic development:

- In killing the French, a lot of institutional knowledge and expertise was lost (a tremendous loss of human resources)
- Breaking up the plantations made coordinating crops for export much more difficult.
- And making land ownership open to Haitians only effectively put an end to foreign investment in Haiti for a very long time.

This is very different than the Dominican Republic which:

- did not have the brutal slave-based economy
- and so did not rise up to expel and kill the ruling colonial power
- and as a result has been much more able as its own country to
 - attract foreign investment
 - engage in trade
 - and welcome to the country small but economically significant populations of immigrants.

III. Environmental differences

- DR side gets more rain. Haiti side is often blocked of rain coming from the East because Hispaniola's highest mountains are on the DR side with rivers mostly flowing east.
- Terrain in Haiti is higher percent mountainous with more limestone terrain.
- Soils are thinner, less fertile, and have lower capacity for recovery than the DR soils.

One Final Note

Race plays a huge part in the international perception of the two countries. Historically, Haiti has always been seen as black and hostile to foreigners. The DR has been seen as Latino and much more welcoming to foreigners.

All of these factors, in combination with Haiti's history of political turmoil (out of Haiti's 22 presidents from 1843 to 1915, 21 were assassinated or driven out of office) and more recent events with the reign of Papa Doc Duvalier and Baby Doc all during the mid to late 1900s, Aristide's rise to power and current exile, and now the famous singer Michel "Sweet Mickey" Martelly's presidency, have led to the development, health, and economic disparities between Haiti and the DR.

(Haiti vs. DR analysis summarized from Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond's book "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed" – Chapter 11. Copyright Penguin 2006)

Thank you for your commitment to Haiti's better future. And thank you for pursuing a more effective and respectful way of working in the country. This movement starts with us.

If you have any feedback or suggestions about this HaitiHub Info Packet, please be in touch. We love hearing from you! Email:

community@haitihub.com

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And check us out at www.haitihub.com for the highest quality Creole-learning resources available anywhere. Speaking Creole is THE BEST investment you can make in your relationships, work, and safety in Haiti.

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We're here for you!

HaitiHub: Kote n'ap mete tèt ansanm!

Sincerely,

~ The Team at HaitiHub