

Haiti

Let's not kid ourselves: Haiti has an image problem. Say the name and you're likely to invoke a sad litany of coups and boat people, tinged with lurid clichés of voodoo sacrifices. As both failed state and media whipping boy, Haiti has long played the dark shadow to the bright sunlight of the rest of the Caribbean. But banish those thoughts, because we believe that Haiti may just be one of the most exciting countries in the world in which to travel.

Haiti saw the only successful slave revolution in colonial history, with the result that it clung on to its African roots more than any other Caribbean country. These roots have evolved into a wholly unique culture. The most famous result is Vodou, which informs many aspects of life, from the rhythms of *racines* music to the exuberance of Haitian painting.

Port-au-Prince is a frenetic city where you'll find plenty of good food, music and art. In the north is the Citadelle, a truly mind-blowing fortress high in the tropical mountains. In the south, Jacmel is the country's handicrafts capital, and hosts one of the best Carnival parades around. And between the two there are plenty of deserted beaches.

Getting around can sometimes be a little tough, but you certainly shouldn't believe all the scare stories. Haitians are enormously welcoming and proud, and desperate to show visitors the reality behind the screaming headlines. As the country moves out of the turmoil of recent years towards a cautious stability, now just may be the time to visit.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 27,750 sq km
- **Capital** Port-au-Prince
- **Country code** ☎ 509
- **Departure tax** None (paid for in air ticket)
- **Famous for** Vodou
- **Language** Creole, French
- **Money** Haitian gourde (HTG); HTG100 = US\$2.62 = €1.69 = UK£1.33
- **Official name** Republic of Haiti
- **People** Haitians
- **Phrase** *bonjou/bonswa* (good morning/good afternoon); *mèsi anpil* (thank you); *orevwa/babay* (goodbye); *se konbyen kob li koute?* (how much is it?)
- **Population** 8.7 million
- **Visa** None needed; see p276



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Port-au-Prince** (p266) Explore the unparalleled arts and music scene of Haiti's vibrant and sometimes chaotic capital city
- **Jacmel** (p270) Chill out in this laid-back southern port, the country's handicrafts and Carnival center
- **Citadelle** (p273) Want a tropical mountaintop fortress? We challenge you to find a better one in the Caribbean
- **Vodou** (p264) Dispel your fear of zombies by lifting the lid on this misunderstood but deeply spiritual religion
- **Cornier Plage and Plage Labadie** (p273) Catch some waves on the golden sands of Haiti's dramatic north coast

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Stay a couple of days in Port-au-Prince, then spend two more in Jacmel before taking a flight north to visit the Citadelle.
- **Two Weeks** Follow the itinerary above at a more relaxed pace, and add on Parc National La Visite and some beaches near Cap-Haïtien, Côte des Arcadins or Île-à-Vache.
- **One Month** You can see the whole of Haiti in a month, with time for scuba diving, and more out-of-the-way destinations like Jérémie or Parc National Macaya.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

There's no season for visiting Haiti. April to November are generally the wetter months, and hurricane season (August/September) can cause transport problems due to mudslides. If you plan to visit during Carnival (usually celebrated in February), book well in advance as a good hotel may be hard to find. Otherwise, hotel prices generally don't fluctuate through the year.

HISTORY

Hispaniola's earliest inhabitants arrived around 2600 BC in huge dugout canoes, coming from what is now eastern Venezuela. They were called the Taínos, and by the time Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1492, they numbered some 400,000. However, within 30 years of Columbus' landing, the Taínos were gone, wiped out by disease and abuse.

The Spanish neglected their colony of Santo Domingo, and through the 17th century it

became a haven for pirates and, later, ambitious French colonists. In 1697 the island was formally divided, and the French colony of St-Domingue followed soon after. The French turned St-Domingue over to sugar production on a huge scale. By the end of the 18th century it was the richest colony in the world, with 40,000 colonists lording it over half a million black slaves.

Following the French Revolution in 1789, free mulattos (offspring of colonists and female slaves) demanded equal rights, while the slaves themselves launched a huge rebellion. Led by the inspiring slave leader Toussaint Louverture, the slaves freed themselves by arms and forced France to abolish slavery.

World's First Black Republic

French treachery dispatched Toussaint to a prison death, but in May 1803 his general, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, took the French tricolor flag and, ripping the white out of it, declared he was ripping the white man out of the country. The red and blue were stitched together with the motto *Liberté ou la Mort* (Liberty or Death), creating Haiti's flag.

Dessalines won a decisive victory against the French at the Battle Vertières, near Cap-Haïtien, and on January 1, 1804, at Gonaïves, Dessalines proclaimed independence for St-Domingue and restored its Taíno name, Haiti, meaning 'Mountainous Land.'

Dessalines crowned himself Emperor of Haiti and ratified a new constitution that granted him absolute power. However, his tyrannical approach to the throne inflamed large sections of society to revolt – his death in an ambush at Pont Rouge in 1806 marked the first of many violent overthrows that would plague Haiti for the next 200 years.

Dessalines' death sparked a civil war between the black north, led by Henri Christophe, and the mulatto south, led by Alexandre Pétion. Christophe crowned himself king, while Pétion became president of the southern republic. It took both their deaths (Christophe by suicide) to reunite the country, which happened in 1820 under new southern leader Jean-Pierre Boyer, who established a tenuous peace.

During his reign Boyer paid a crippling indemnity to France in return for diplomatic recognition. The debt took the rest of the century to pay off and turned Haiti into the first Third World debtor nation. Boyer also

sought to unify Hispaniola by invading Santo Domingo. The whole of the island remained under Haitian control until 1849, when the eastern part proclaimed independence as the Dominican Republic.

The next half-century was characterized by continued rivalry between the ruling classes of wealthy mulattos and blacks. Of the 22 heads of state between 1843 and 1915, only one served his full term in office; the others were assassinated or forced into exile.

US Intervention

By the beginning of the 20th century the US had begun to recognize that Haiti's proximity to the Windward Passage gave the country strategic importance. The stretch of sea between Haiti and Cuba was an important shipping route from the newly opened Panama Canal to the eastern coast of the US.

When Haitian President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam was killed by an angry civilian mob in 1915, the Americans took it as their chance to invade Haiti, in theory aiming to stabilize the country. The occupation furthered the economic interests of the US in Haiti, who rewrote the constitution in favor of American corporations and introduced forced labor gangs to build infrastructure. The occupation brought predictable resistance, with the Cacos peasant rebellion led by Charlemagne Péralte from 1918 to 1920. Its brutal suppression cost the lives of about 2000 Haitians, and is still bitterly remembered in the country today. The occupation proved costly and the US finally pulled out in 1934.

The Duvaliers & Aristide

Haiti's string of tyrannical rulers reached its zenith in 1956 with the election of François Duvalier, whose support came from the burgeoning black middle class and the politically isolated rural poor. But he knew where the dangers lay and within months acted swiftly to neutralize his opponents.

Duvalier consolidated his power by creating the notorious Tontons Macoutes. The name refers to a character in a Haitian folk story, Tonton Macoute (Uncle Knapsack), who carries off small children in his bag at night. The Tontons Macoutes were a private militia who could use force with impunity in order to extort cash and crops from a cowed population. In exchange for this privilege, they afforded Duvalier utmost loyalty and protection.

HOW MUCH?

- **Taxi from Port-au-Prince to Pétienville** US\$10
- **Meal in a touristy restaurant** US\$9
- **Snickers bar** US\$1.20
- **Bottle of five-star Haitian rum** US\$15
- **Double room in a midrange hotel** US\$75

'Papa Doc' died on April 21, 1971, and was succeeded by his son Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier. Periodic bouts of repression continued until major civil unrest forced Baby Doc to flee to France in February 1986.

Control changed hands between junta leaders until finally the Supreme Court ordered elections for December 1990. A young priest named Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, standing as a surprise last-minute candidate with the slogan '*Lavalas*' (Flood), won a landslide victory.

Aristide promised radical reforms to aid the poor, but after just seven months he was pushed out of office. An alliance of rich mulatto families and army generals, worried about their respective business and drug interests, staged a bloody coup, with General Raoul Cédras as their front man. Despite international condemnation, an embargo against the junta was barely enforced, and thousands of Haitians fled political repression in boats to the USA. After four years a joint US-UN plan saw Cédras leave for exile in Panama, and Aristide finally back as president. In return, Aristide was forced to implement harsh free-trade economic reforms.

Haiti Today

After a period in opposition, Aristide returned as president in 2001. His opponents boycotted the elections and disputed the results, leading to several years of political instability. Things came to a head in early 2004, soon after Haiti marked the 200th anniversary of independence. With violence rife from all sides, an armed revolt forced Aristide back in to exile in February 2004. His supporters claim that US agents effectively kidnapped him (a claim the US denies).

The accession of pro-US Gerard Latortue did little to quell the violence, and the devastation of Tropical Storm Jeanne, which killed 3000, did little to improve matters. A UN

peacekeeping mission, Minustah, was sent to the island, but it took until 2006 before the country appeared to have turned the corner. On the political front, largely peaceful elections returned René Préval as president, while a controversial military campaign by Minustah tackled the gang problem head-on, drastically reducing the violence and kidnappings that had become endemic.

Haiti remains the poorest country in the western hemisphere. A shattered economy, corruption, low life expectancy and high illiteracy rates are only the tip of the challenges facing the nation. In spring 2008, street protests about rising goods prices turned briefly violent and led to the sacking of the prime minister. But whenever conditions have allowed, Haitians have shown themselves able to start building for the future. The continuing attention of the UN will hopefully allow such a breathing space to occur.

THE CULTURE

Haiti is predominantly made up of peasants who live a subsistence lifestyle in rural areas. Traditionally, the men plant and harvest the crops, while the women care for the children, prepare meals and sell surplus crops at the market.

Their small, usually two-room wooden houses have no electricity, and food preparation takes place outside on a charcoal fire. If faced with difficult and arduous work, the men work together on one piece of land in a communal work team called a *kombit*. Neighbors work for free and are compensated by a feast at the end of the day. In the evenings after eating, the group often relaxes by playing *Krik? Krak!*, an oral game of riddles.

As the growing population's demands on the land have reached breaking point, many peasants have sought a better life in the capital. But the mass exodus from the land has created teeming slums, such as Cité Soleil. Here much of the communal spirit of the countryside is lost in the everyday grind as about 200,000 people occupy 5 sq km of land, mainly reclaimed sea swamp, in some of the harshest conditions imaginable.

Another life altogether prevails in the cool hills above Port-au-Prince. The country's elite, the 1% of society that has nearly half the wealth, lives in mansions surrounded by high walls, in and above Pétionville.

Haiti is home to almost nine million people, of whom 80% are rural. People of African origin make up about 95% of Haiti's population. The other 5% is made up of mulattos,

VODOU

It's hard to think of a more consistently maligned and misunderstood religion than Vodou, with many thinking it less a religion than a mass of superstitions based on fear and ignorance. This negative portrayal comes partly from lurid Hollywood movies, but also from Haiti's isolation and demonization during the 19th century following its impertinence in casting off colonial rule with its successful slave revolution.

Vodou (the Creole spelling is preferred locally over the anglicized 'Voodoo') is not an animist religion that worships spirits. Followers worship God, who they call *Gran Met*, but believe he is distant from the physical plane, so lesser spirit entities called *lwa* are approached in ceremonies as interlocutors. *Lwa* are summoned through prayer, song and drumming. The *lwa* possess Vodou initiates, and manifest and identify themselves by singing, dancing, healing the sick and offering advice. There are several 'families' of *lwa*, including the *Rada* and *Gédé* (associated with death), and families connected to Vodou's African forbears such as the *Kongo* and *Ibo*.

Haitian Vodou is unique. It's a mix of the traditional religions brought by slaves from West and Central Africa, blended with residual rituals from the *Taino* along with Catholicism inherited from the plantation owners. While conversion to Christianity was encouraged, many saw in the icons of Catholic saints their own African spirits, represented in new forms and ideas, and appropriated the images as their own. Each *lwa* in the Vodou pantheon has its own surrogate Catholic saint, and Vodou altars are rich blends of African and Christian iconography.

Vodou has had a conflicted relationship with Haitian power. It played a key role in both the inspiration and organization of the struggle for independence, has also been outlawed at various times, with regular Catholic-led 'anti-superstition' campaigns. In 1991 Vodou was officially recognized as a Haitian religion, coexisting and (mostly) tolerated by the Church.

Middle Easterners and people of other races. Members of the mulatto class, which constitutes half of the country's elite and controls most of the economy and political life, are the descendants of African slaves and French plantation owners.

A popular maxim has it that Haiti is 80% Catholic, 20% Protestant, but 100% Vodou. This uniquely Haitian religion, blending many traditional African religions with Catholic elements permeates the country (see boxed text, opposite).

Catholicism dominates public life, and has frequently found itself swimming in the murky currents of Haitian politics. Papa Doc Duvalier exiled many Catholic orders and created his own loyal clergy, who remembered him in their prayers and stayed silent over the regime's excesses. On a grassroots level, the Ti Legliz (Little Church) movement took inspiration from the 1980s Latin American liberation theologians, and was instrumental not only in ousting the Duvaliers but sweeping Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide into power in 1991.

Protestantism is a relatively new import into Haiti, arriving in an evangelical wave in the 1970s. Many churches from North America, mainstream and otherwise, continue to pour missionaries and money into the country, and own many radio stations. Evangelicals are usually fiercely opposed to Vodou, often claiming that Haiti's myriad problems are punishment by God for the sins of following Vodou.

ARTS

For its size and population, Haiti has an abundance of artists – they are predominantly painters, but also metalworkers and Vodou flag makers. Much of Haitian art has been classified as 'naïve' or 'primitive,' partly due to its simple style and avoidance of classical perspective.

The major factor contributing to the singular vision of Haiti's artists is their inextricable link with Vodou. Artists serve the lwa (Vodou spirits) by painting murals to decorate the walls of temples and making elaborate sequined flags for use in ceremonies.

Hector Hyppolite, now considered Haiti's greatest painter, was a Vodou priest. Other great naïves include Rigaud Benoît and Philomé Obin. The murals of Ste Trinité Episcopalian Cathedral (p267) in Port-au-Prince are the best showcase of this classic period of Haitian art.

Musical expression in Haiti reflects both the fusion of cultural influences and, more recently, popular resistance and struggle in Haitian politics. Vodou ceremonies have always been accompanied by music, song and dance. *Rara* is a Vodou performance ritual held during the weeks before Easter, when temple ceremonies are taken to the streets.

Racines (roots) music grew out of the Vodou jazz movement of the late 1970s. Vodou jazz was a fusion of American jazz with Vodou rhythms and melodies. Two of the best *racines* bands are RAM and Boukman Eksperyans. *Compas*, a Haitian form of merengue, is very popular in dance clubs.

In the years since independence, intellectual Haitians have created a strong school of indigenous literature to counter prevailing concepts of Haiti as a nation of primitive savages. The most important cultural flowering was in response to the US occupation of 1915–34, from which grew the *Noirisme* movement, and its artistic counterpart *Indigénisme*. Both positively embraced Haiti's unique identity and African heritage. The leading *Noiriste* writers were Jean Price-Mars and Jacques Roumain, author of *Les gouverneurs de la rosée* (Masters of the Dew), considered to be Haiti's finest work of literature. Some of the best current Haitian writers are those of the diaspora, including novelist Edwidge Danticat, author of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and *The Farming of Bones*.

On the architectural front, little remains of the colonial period, although a number of independence-era forts can be visited, including the stupendous Citadelle (p273). In the late 19th century, Parisian style met the requirements of tropical living in Haiti's so-called gingerbread houses and mansions, characterized by their graceful balconies, detailed wooden latticework and neo-Gothic designs. Many fine examples can still be seen in Port-au-Prince and Jacmel.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Haiti occupies the mountainous western third of Hispaniola, sharing a 388km border with the Dominican Republic. About the size of the US state of Maryland, the country is cut by hundreds of rivers and streams, many of which bring torrential flood waters and eroded soil during the hurricane season. Rising above these river valleys are four mountain chains;

Haiti's tallest mountain is 2674m Pic La Selle, located in the southeast of the country. Haiti's largest drainage system, the Artibonite river, extends 400km through the center of the country. The river was dammed in its upper reaches in 1956, forming the Lac de Péligre behind Haiti's major hydroelectric facility. Its delta, south of Gonaïves, is a key rice-producing area.

Wildlife

Haiti is rich in birdlife, with 220 species, including the palmchat and the La Selle thrush. The gray-crowned palm tanager is a species unique to Haiti. Water birds include American flamingos and the black-capped petrel, a seabird that nests in the high cliffs of Massif de la Selle and the Massif de la Hotte.

Despite major habitat destruction, some endemic animals remain, including a small population of manatees in the coastal waters. Of the four types of sea turtle here, the largest is the leatherback, which can weigh up to 600kg. Reptiles include iguanas and American crocodiles, which can be seen at Étang Saumâtre.

Environmental Issues

Haiti is a popular university case study in environmental degradation and disaster, perhaps equaled only by Madagascar and the more devastated parts of the Amazon rainforest. Unchecked clearing of the land for food production and fuel wood has depleted massive tracts of broadleaf forest. Only a small portion of virgin forest survives, including on the Massif de la Selle and the cloud forests of Massif de la Hotte.

The destruction of the forests for firewood and farmland has caused an untenable amount of soil erosion, as well as trapping Haiti's peasants in a cycle of subsistence farming with ever-diminishing returns. The bare hillsides can prove lethal during hurricane season, when rainfall easily causes terrible mudslides and floods. Neighboring Dominican Republic with its intact forest cover comes out of the same storm systems in much better shape.

FOOD & DRINK

You'll frequently eat at bar-restos, cheap eating places that double up as drinking holes in the evening. Most offer a *plat complet*, with *diri ak pwa* (rice and beans), *bannann peze* (fried plantain), salad and meat – usu-

ally *poule* (fried chicken), *tasso* (jerked beef), *griyo* (fried pork) or *kabri* (goat). The dish can be served with *sòs Kreyol* (tomato-based Creole sauce), *ti malice* (onion and chili sauce) or a *sòs vyann* (meat sauce). Seafood is widely available, including lobster, and is very reasonably priced.

Haiti has a prize-winning beer, Prestige, and is the only Caribbean country that makes rum direct from sugarcane rather than molasses. The Haitian rum company is called Barbancourt, and both its three- and five-star varieties are excellent. Also look out for *clairin*, a cheap cane spirit. There's also wonderful local coffee, including Haitian Blue that's produced mainly for export.

PORT-AU-PRINCE

pop 3 million

Port-au-Prince is the picture of a chaotic developing-world city. It has a reputation for impoverished chaos, and its infrastructure can seem permanently on the point of collapse. Yet behind this lies one of the most vibrant and exciting cities in the Caribbean, with a fantastic arts scene, good restaurants and live music and an irrepressible spirit.

The center of the city is compact and manageable on foot, while on the hillsides above you'll find the rich suburb of Pétionville, where many of the best hotels and restaurants are based.

INFORMATION

If you are changing US\$ cash, all supermarkets have change counters.

Companet Cyber Café (Rue Lamarre, Pétionville; per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 9am-7pm)

DNS Computer (Rue Capois; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-9pm)

Hôpital du Canapé Vert (☎ 2245-0984/85; 83 Rte de Canapé Vert) Has a 24-hour emergency department. It's 1.5km east of the center.

Post office (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat); Pétionville (Place St Pierre); Port-au-Prince (Rue Bonne Foi, Bicentenaire)

Scotiabank (cnr Rues Geffrard & Louverture, Pétionville) Has an ATM.

Sogebank Pétionville (Rue Lamarre; Pétionville); Port-au-Prince (Delmas 30) Both have ATMs.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Port-au-Prince is a lot calmer than preconceptions would have you believe. But street



crime isn't unknown, so don't be ostentatious or keep your cash in your back pocket as the pickpockets are skillful. It's very unwise to walk around after dark, even around areas such as Champs de Mars. Avoid visiting the slum areas, such as Cité Soleil off Rte Nationale 1 and Cité Liberté off Blvd Harry Truman.

SIGHTS

The main area for sightseeing is within and around the **Champs de Mars**, the large park built in 1953. Here you'll find a couple of museums and the **Palais National**. The **Place des Héros de l'Indépendance**, east of the palace, contains the statues of the founders of independent Haiti. The *Statue of the Unknown*

Slave depicts a runaway slave blowing a conch-shell trumpet as a call to begin the revolution.

The **Musée du Panthéon National** (Mupanah; ☎ 2222-8337; Place du Champs de Mars; adult/student US\$1.40/0.70; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Thu, 8am-5pm Fri, noon-5pm, Sat 10am-4pm Sun) contains various items of historical interest, including King Christophe's suicidal pistol and the rusting anchor of Columbus' flagship, the *Santa María*.

The **Museum of Haitian Art** (☎ 2222-2510; Rue Légitime; admission US\$1.40; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun) has a large collection of Haitian naïve art. For an even more inspiring setting go to the **Ste Trinité Episcopalian Cathedral** (cnr Ave Mgr Guilloux & Rue Pavée), just north of Champs de Mars. Its interior is decorated with fantastically exuberant biblical murals painted by the great masters of Haitian painting, including Philomé Obin and Wilson Bigaud.

The **Centre d'Art** (58 Ruelle Roy; 🕒 9:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat), originally an artists' cooperative, is on a quiet street off Rue Capois several blocks south of Champs de Mars. Alternatively, visit the **Grand Rue artists** (www.atis-rezistans.com; 622 Blvd Jean-Jacques Dessalines), who turns scrap and found objects into startling Vodou sculpture – a Caribbean junkyard gone cyber-punk.

SLEEPING

The main choice is heading downtown, or up to Pétionville. All places reviewed here, except Doux Sejour Guest House and Le Marcellin Inn, have wi-fi included in the room price.

our pick **St Joseph's Home for Boys Guest House** (☎ 2257-4237; sjfamilyhaiti@hotmail.com; 3rd street on right, Delmas 91; shared r per person incl half-board US\$35; 🏠) This guesthouse also operates as a highly regarded home for ex-street boys, and offers a fantastic Haitian experience. Meals are taken communally, making you feel part of the 'St Joe's family.' It's 4.5km east of the center.

Doux Sejour Guest House (☎ 2257-1533, 2257-1560; www.douxsejourhaiti.com; 32 Rue Magny, Pétionville; s/d from US\$40/50; 🏠) A fun little guesthouse, the Doux Sejour has a series of airy rooms interestingly laid out and a good restaurant.

Le Marcellin Inn (☎ 2221-8233, 2221-9445; www.marcellin.com; 29 Rue Marcellin; r US\$76-86; 🏠) A good-value modern hotel that's been pleasingly 'gingerbreadized' to inject some character.

Hotel Kinam (☎ 2257-0462, 2257-6525; www.hotelkinam.com; Place Saint-Pierre, Pétionville; s/d/ste from US\$76/112/120; 🏠) Offering quality be-

yond its price tag, this large gingerbread hotel sits right in the center of Pétionville.

our pick **Hôtel Oloffson** (☎ 2223-4000/02; oloffsonram@aol.com; 60 Ave Christophe; s/d US\$80/92, ste US\$130-146, bungalows US\$101-118; 🏠) Immortalized in Graham Greene's novel *The Comedians*, a stay at the Oloffson is an iconic Port-au-Prince experience. A beautiful gingerbread building (although slightly knocked around the edges), with a terrace for lunch and rum punch, and live music every Thursday (see opposite).

La Villa Creole (☎ 2257-1570, 2257-0965; www.villacreole.com; Rte El Rancho, Pétionville; s/d/ste from US\$132/165/185; 🏠) Top-end service marries well with a relaxed air here, with excellent rooms and an exceedingly pleasant bar and pool area.

Hotel Montana (☎ 2229-4000, 3510-9495; www.hotelmontana.com; Impasse Cardozo, Ave Panaméricaine, Pétionville; s/d/ste from US\$133/165/330; 🏠) The hotel of choice for Haiti's great and good, with an air of international professionalism, business facilities and a famous view over the city.

EATING

The sleeping listings all provide good eating options. For quick Creole food, 'bar-restos' are plentiful, although most stop serving food early evening.

Citadelle Restaurant (4 Rue St Cyr; mains US\$1-3.50; 🕒 lunch & dinner) In a lovely dilapidated red-and-white gingerbread, the food is all Haitian, the atmosphere relaxed.

La Café Terrasse (☎ 2222-5648; 11 Rue Capois; lunches around US\$4-9; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) You enter this café on Rue Ducoste. It's particularly good for salads and crepes; you can eat in either the upstairs salon or the terrace café, which is designed for quick refueling.

our pick **Anba Tonel** (☎ 2257-7560; cnr Rues Cerveaux & Vilatte, Pétionville; mains US\$6; 🕒 5-11pm, closed Mon-Wed) Excellent Creole food, including *kibby* (fried stuffed meatballs), served amid wonderful kitsch decor.

Fiori di Latte (☎ 2256-8474; Choucouné Plaza, Rue Lamarre, Pétionville; mains US\$6-11; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Very popular for extended lunch breaks. The menu is mainly Italian, with homemade ice cream for dessert.

Papaye (☎ 3513-9229; 48 Rue Métellus, Pétionville; mains around US\$18-28; 🕒 noon-2:30pm & 7-11pm, closed Sun & Mon) 'Caribbean fusion' isn't a term that should work, but here it's carried off with aplomb, taking Creole dishes and jamming them up against Asian, European and other culinary influences.

ENTERTAINMENT

Many bar-restaurants host live music, and serve booze well after the food runs out. Look out for billboards posted on major junctions advertising forthcoming concerts.

Several bands play regular concerts; they generally start between 11pm and midnight. Foremost is RAM at the **Hôtel Oloffson** (☎ 2223-4000/02; oloffsonram@aol.com; 60 Ave Christophe) every Thursday (see below). Also worth checking out is the troubadour band Macaya at the **La Villa Creole** (☎ 2257-1570, 2257-0965; www.villacreole.com; Rte El Rancho, Pétionville). There's no cover charge for these shows, but you'll have to pay to get into **Xtreme** (☎ 2257-0841; 64 Rue Grégoire, Pétionville) to see Orchestre Super Choucoune, a big band playing *compas* and merengue on Saturdays.

SHOPPING

Marché de Fer (Iron Market; cnr Blvd Jean-Jacques Dessalines & Rue des Fronts Forts) This is the Port-au-Prince shopping experience, a huge Arabian Nights-style hall that's both a food and craft market, selling everything from baskets of dried mushrooms to various Vodou ephemera. It's open daily. Be prepared for plenty of bustle, and a little hustle too.

Comité Artisanat Haïtien (29 Rue 3) This craft-makers' cooperative has worked to promote Haitian crafts and provide fair wages for its artisans. The shop is strong on well-priced metalwork, sculptures, and painted boxes and miniature taptaps (local Haitian buses).

For paintings, try the Centre d'Art (oppo-site) or the upscale galleries in Pétionville.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

For more information on international and domestic air travel to and from Port-au-Prince, see p277 and p277 respectively. A taxi to the airport costs around US\$20.

Buses for southwest Haiti, including Jacmel (US\$2.70, three hours) and Les Cayes (US\$8, four hours), depart from the junction of Rue Oswald Durand and Blvd Jean-Jacques Dessalines (Grand Rue). For Cap-Haïtien (US\$12, seven hours) and points north, go to Estation O'Cap, at the corner of Grand Rue and Blvd La Saline, 1.5km north of the center.

To get around, taptaps run set routes along the major roads, including Grand Rue, Delmas, Ave John Brown (Lalue) and Canape Vert. The last three all go to Pétionville. Fares are HTG5 (US\$0.15). *Publiques* (collective taxis) cost HTG25 (US\$0.40).

VODOU ROCK & ROOTS

Every Thursday night between 11 and midnight, crowds gather at the Hôtel Oloffson to dance until the small hours to the Vodou rock 'n' roots music of RAM. A potent blend of African rhythms, *rara* horns, guitar and keyboards, the shows have an irresistible atmosphere. At the center of everything is band leader (and Oloffson owner) Richard A Morse. We caught up with him after a show:

How would you describe RAM's music?

When Haiti became independent, half the population had been born in Africa. Because it was a slave revolt, the surrounding countries ostracized Haiti to try to keep the revolution from spreading. That isolation kept Haiti's roots intact. We take those African roots as a starting point to our music, hence the word *racines* or 'roots.'

RAM's music often has a strong political element, and you've had some run-ins with the authorities in the past...

Well, I've been grabbed by authorities and some band members were once arrested during a show. If I get into more detail, perhaps we'll lose our 'tourist' audience!

Do you really play every single Thursday at the Oloffson?

We sometimes take the month of October off before starting up again in November. But the party here on Thursdays is always new and fresh. People join in, people dance, some are off in the corners making deals or exchanging stories. Sometimes I can't believe I'm in the middle of it. When I read Quincy Jones' description of a 'Juke Joint,' I thought, 'I live in a Juke Joint!'

We heard you bought the Oloffson in a slightly unorthodox manner.

I was coming back from a friend's house one Saturday morning with a *houngan* (Vodou priest) I had met. He asked me, 'Do you want the hotel?' to which I replied 'No.' Once again he asked me, 'Do you want the hotel?' and once again I said 'No.' His eyes were getting wider and he was getting more excited as he said 'Say yes! Say yes! Do you want the hotel??' To which I resigned myself and said 'Okay, I want the hotel' and he snapped back, 'GIVE ME TWENTY DOLLARS!...'

AROUND PORT-AU-PRINCE

The clamor of Port-au-Prince can tire even the most die-hard traveler after a while – luckily there are several worthwhile sights within striking distance of the capital.

EAST OF PORT-AU-PRINCE

The market town of **Croix des Bouquets** (taptaps US\$1, 30 minutes from Carrefour Trois Mains near Port-au-Prince airport) is famous for its iron workers, who hammer out incredible decorative art from flattened oil drums and vehicle bodies. It's great fun to wander around the Noailles districts watching the artisans and looking for souvenirs. There's a complete absence of hard sell.

East of Croix des Bouquets, the main road reaches **Lac Azueï**, Haiti's largest saltwater lake. The lake supports over 100 species, including flamingos and American crocodiles. If you have time, it's worth making a detour to also visit **Trou Caïman**, an excellent place for spotting waterfowl.

Kenscoff, above Pétienville, is the entry point for **Parc National La Visite**. A hike from here across the western section of Massif de la Selle to Seguin, overlooking the Caribbean, takes six to eight hours, and is one of the most spectacular walks in Haiti. Start your trek at Carrefour Badyo just beyond Kenscoff, and be prepared for unexpected rain and chill as well as strong sun. Once you reach Seguin, you can sleep overnight in the cozy **Auberge de la Visite** (☎ 2246-0166, 2257-1579; tiroyd@yahoo.com; r with full board US\$50), before descending to Marigot and catching transport to Jacmel.

NORTH OF PORT-AU-PRINCE

Rte Nationale 1 is the main highway to Cap-Haïtien via Gonaïves. It skirts the coast, called the Côte des Arcadins, for most of the first 80km between Cabaret (the former Duvalierville satirized in Greene's *The Comedians*) and St-Marc. It is here that most of the country's beach resorts are situated, packed out at weekends. **Kaliko Beach Club** (☎ 3513-7548; www.kalikobeachclub.com; Km 61, Rte Nationale 1; s/d with full board US\$110/150, day pass US\$25; 🍷 🍷 🍷) is an attractive resort and also home to dive operators **Pegasus** (☎ 3624-9486, 3624-9411,

3624-4775; nicolemarcelinroy@yahoo.com), which can arrange charters for qualified divers.

If you wish to take public transportation, catch a bus or taptap in Port-au-Prince from Estation O'Cap, beside the Shell gas station at the confluence of Blvd Jean-Jacques Dessalines (Grand Rue) and Blvd La Saline. Return transport is a lot more hit and miss, as you're reliant on flagging down passing buses – don't leave it too late in the afternoon.

SOUTHERN HAITI

Haiti's south is all about taking it easy. Pulling out of Port-au-Prince, the urban hustle is soon replaced by a much more relaxed air and rightly so – you're heading towards the Caribbean Sea.

JACMEL

pop 40,000

Jacmel is a 120km drive southwest of Port-au-Prince, via one of the best roads in the country. A busy coffee port at the turn of the 20th century, it retains much of its late-Victorian grace with wide streets lined by elegant town houses. It's an easy town to be charmed by. Famed as Haiti's handicrafts capital, much of its creativity can be seen in the fantastic papier-mâché masks made for the Carnival festivities.

Information

Associations des Micro-Enterprises Touristiques du Sud'Est (AMETS; ☎ 2288-2840; amets_service@yahoo.fr; 40 Rue d'Orléans; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Has maps of Jacmel, and can arrange car and horse hire.

Banque Nationale de Crédit (Grand Rue)

Jacmel Cybernet (Ave Baranquilla; per hr US\$1.10; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) Has good electricity supply.

Philippe Agent de Change (Ave Baranquilla) Changes euros and Canadian dollars

Post office (Rue du Commerce; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat)

Sights & Activities

Close to the seafront, Rue du Commerce has many fine examples of 19th-century warehouses; at the eastern end of the street are the **customs house**, an old 18th-century **prison** and the **wharf**. There are **merchants' mansions** strewn all over town in varying states of

decay, including the **Manoir Alexandre**, a rickety old hotel, and **Salubria Gallery**.

East of Place d'Armes, the town square, is a red-and-green baroque **Marché de Fer** built in 1895, which resembles a scaled-down version of the grand iron market in Port-au-Prince. The pretty 19th-century **Cathédrale de St Philippe et St Jacques** (Rue de l'Eglise) is close to the market.

The closest beach to town is **La Saline**, a 30-minute walk from the center past the cemetery (US\$0.40 by moto-taxi), a small cove with crystal-clear water. The best beach is at **Cyadrier Plage**, 10km east of town.

Around 12km inland from Jacmel, reached on horseback or on foot, is **Bassins-Bleu**, a spectacular grotto of cascades and cobalt blue pools.

There are many guides in Jacmel who will, for a fee, take you on the journey by horse, which takes about two hours each way. It is advisable to negotiate the full price before you set off to avoid endless squabbling en route. Consider paying about US\$20 per person, but you may have to pay more. A broad hat and sunblock are recommended.

Sleeping & Eating

Guy's Guesthouse (☎ 2288-2569, 2288-9646; Ave de la Liberté; s US\$25-40, d US\$40-50, tr US\$55, all incl breakfast; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Popular with NGO workers, Guy's is a welcoming place, and although bathrooms are shared, everything is kept very clean. Breakfasts are huge, and the restaurant out front is a good place for lunch or dinner.

Hôtel de la Place (☎ 2288-3769; 3 Rue de l'Eglise; r US\$45; 🍷) A pleasant old building overlooking Place Toussaint L'Ouverture, and a good place to enjoy Carnival. Some rooms are a little on the small side; most manage a view. The ground-floor terrace bar seems designed for hours of people-watching.

Cyadrier Plage Hôtel (☎ 2288-3323; www.hotelcyadrier.com; Route de Cyadrier; s US\$61-72, d US\$82-104, tr US\$158; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Off the main highway, this is the furthest of the beach hotels from the center of Jacmel, but also one of the best. Rooms in a cluster of buildings face the excellent terrace restaurant and the private cove of Cyadrier Plage.

Hôtel Florita (☎ 2288-2805; www.hotelflorita.com; 29 Rue du Commerce; r US\$66; 🍷) A converted mansion, the Florita oozes charm. There are polished floorboards, period furniture and comfy chairs aplenty, while rooms are whitewashed

and airy (extra rooms at the back are a bit more cramped).

Petit Coin Restaurant (☎ 2288-3067; Rue Bourbon; mains around US\$7; 🍷 noon-11pm) A cozy little restaurant, with a hint of French bistro. Three tables on a tiny terrace allow you to catch the last of the day's sun and to people-spot, before retiring to the interior.

Eritaj Café (50 Ave Barranquilla; fish US\$7-12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) On the main drag, the Eritaj has a shady courtyard with bright murals on the wall. Fish is the order of the day, but there are some interesting pasta dishes also on offer.

Shopping

Jacmel is a souvenir-buyer's paradise. Handicrafts include hand-painted placemats and boxes, wooden flowers, and models of taptaps, jungle animals and boats. Prices are cheap, starting at a couple of dollars for the smallest items, and the atmosphere is very relaxed. Most of the shops can be found on Rue St-Anne in the vicinity of the Hôtel la Jacmelienne sur Plage.

Getting There & Around

Caribintair (☎ 2250-2031) has a daily flight to Port-au-Prince (US\$80, 15 minutes). Buses to Port-au-Prince (US\$2.70, three hours) leave from the Bassin Caïman station just outside of town. Some taptaps (US\$3, 2½ hours) also leave from Marché Geffrard closer to the center. If you want to travel west, get off at Carrefour Duffourt and flag down passing buses; there are no direct buses west from Jacmel.

LES CAYES

pop 46,000

You'd be hard pressed to find a sense of urgency in this old rum port, as it's lulled into a sense of torpor by the gentle Caribbean breeze. More popularly known as Aux Cayes, it's sheltered by a series of reefs that have sent many ships to their graves. Though there's little here for visitors, it's the jumping off point for nearby Île-à-Vache.

The **Concorde Hôtel** (☎ 2286-0079; Rue Gabions des Indigènes; s/d with fan US\$40/47, with air-con US\$45/57; 🍷 🍷) is the best option, set in large, pleasant gardens. The **Nami Restaurant** (☎ 286-1114; 15 Rue Nicholas Geffrard; mains US\$5-7; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) surprises with Chinese, continental and Creole dishes.

Buses, including to Port-au-Prince (US\$8, four hours), leave from near Carrefour des Quatre Chemins. For travel to and from Jacmel, take a Port-au-Prince bus and change at Léogâne. Taptaps to Port Salut (US\$1; 45 minutes) are plentiful.

ÎLE-À-VACHE

About 15km off the coast of Les Cayes, the Île-à-Vache makes a good tropical getaway, complete with rural houses, mangroves, the odd Arawak burial ground and some great beaches. Its history is tied closely with that of Captain Morgan, the famous buccaneer who was based here for a while.

Two equally excellent upmarket resorts make up the accommodation options: **Abaka Bay Resort** (☎ 3721-3691; www.abakabay.com; s/d US\$98/195; 📶 📺) and **Port Morgan** (☎ 921-0000; www.port-morgan.com; s/d with full board from US\$225/420, 2 night minimum; 📶 📺 📺). The former has the best beach, the latter the better food. Both offer transfers for guests, otherwise boats leave from Les Cayes wharf several times a day (US\$2, 30 minutes).

PORT SALUT

An excellent new road leads west from Les Cayes to Port Salut, a one-street town strung for several miles along the coast. The main reason to come here is the beach: miles of palm-fringed white sand with barely a person on it, and the gorgeously warm Caribbean to splash around in.

The series of chalets that is **Hôtel du Village** (☎ 3779-1728; portsaluthoteldivillage@yahoo.fr; r with fan/air-con US\$40/65; 📶) was getting a facelift when we visited. The rooms are airy, although you're not likely to spend much time inside since your front door opens straight onto the beach.

Stylish and immaculate rooms are the order of the day at **Auberge du Rayon Vert** (☎ 3713-9035; aubergedurayonvert@yahoo.fr; s/d US\$79/112; 📶), with locally made furniture and very modern bathrooms, and the beach seconds away. The restaurant-bar is the best in Port Salut.

A decent bar-resto, **Chez Guito** (mains US\$4-9; 📶 lunch, dinner), opposite Hôtel du Village, is the place to head for fish, a cold Prestige and a sweet *compas* soundtrack.

There are regular taptaps to Les Cayes (US\$1, 45 minutes).

PARC NATIONAL MACAYA & JÉRÉMIE

The cloud forest-covered mountains of Parc National Macaya contain a number of rough trails that cut through some beautiful terrain. The most challenging trek, taking four days round-trip, is to the top of Pic Macaya.

There are no facilities, and you'll need to be self-sufficient. If you're planning a trip, we advise getting in touch with **Philippe Bayard** (pbayard@societeaudubonhaiti.org), president of the Société Audubon Haïti, who can advise on logistics.

Over the mountains (the road is terrible but spectacular) is the isolated port of Jérémie. It has a sleepy charm about it, and the beaches of Anse d'Azur nearby. The lovely **Auberge Inn** (☎ 3727-9678, 465-2207; aubergeinn@netscape.net; 6 Ave Emile Roumer; s US\$45-54, d US\$72-84, tr US\$90-108, all incl breakfast; 📶 📺) is more home than guesthouse.

Buses leave every afternoon for Port-au-Prince (US\$14, 11 hours). There's also a ferry every Friday but it's very creaky and often dangerously overloaded. The quickest way out is the heavily subscribed daily flight to Port-au-Prince (US\$85, 45 minutes).

NORTHERN HAITI

If you're interested in how Haiti came to be how it is today, head for the north coast: it all happened here, and there are still many monuments left to mark out the path of history.

CAP-HAÏTIEN

pop 130,000

Known simply as 'Cap', Haiti's second city is a laid-back place to base yourself in to explore the north. Its streets are laid out in a grid system that makes it difficult to get lost, and the architecture of high shop fronts and balconies make it a pleasant place to wander. The faded grandeur hides the fact that under the French this was the richest port in the Caribbean.

Information

Streets parallel to the sea are lettered A through Q, while those perpendicular are numbered 1 through 24. The wide avenue running the length of the seafont is simply called Boulevard.

There's a useful cluster of banks along Rue 10-11A. When the banks are closed, you can change money on the street outside the Universal Hotel.

Discount Cybercafé (Rue 14H; per hr US\$1.15; ☎ 8am-8pm)

Hôpital Justinien (☎ 2262-0512, 2262-0513; Rue 17Q) Cap-Haïtien's main hospital.

Post office (Rue 16-17A)

Teleco office (Rue 17) Between Rue A and the Boulevard.

Sights

Cap-Haïtien has few sights, although it's fun exploring the streets between the central **Place d'Armes** with the Notre Dame Cathedral, and the busy **Marché de Fer** (Iron Market; ☎ Mon-Sat). There are a few interesting gingerbread houses tucked away on Rues 15 and 16.

If you follow Boulevard north past the suburb of Carenage, you'll come across three French fort sites. The foundations of **Fort Etienne Magny** are marked by a group of cannons, followed by **Fort St Joseph**, on the edge of the cliff. If you continue north until the road peters out at Plage Rival, then continue along the sand for 400m, you'll reach **Fort Picolet**. The fort is ruined, but some quite large walls and staircases still stand, along with an array of cannons. It's a peaceful place to watch the sunset, although it's a dark walk home.

Sleeping & Eating

All hotels listed also have good restaurants.

Universal Hotel (☎ 2262-0254; Rue 17B; r with shared bathroom US\$18, with private bathroom US\$25-30; ☎) A large hotel with several terraces, this is definitely one of the better budget options. Rooms here are simple and clean. The management is helpful and pious too: Bible passages remind guests that the meek shall inherit the earth.

Beau Rivage Hôtel (☎ 2262-3113; beaurivage@yahoo.com; 25 Blvd de Mer; s/d US\$60/80; ☎) The Beau Rivage is a good recent addition to Cap's sleeping options. If some rooms are little on the small and boxy side, they're all well appointed with modern fixtures and fittings (including wi-fi).

Hôtel Mont Joli (☎ 2262-0300; www.hotelmontjoli.com; Rue B, Carenage; s/d US\$78/96; ☎) On a hill overlooking Cap, the Mont Joli easily has the best views in the city, and is good value for the price. Rooms are generously sized, and the hotel has an exceedingly pleasant pool and terrace to chill out on.

Hostellerie du Roi Christophe (☎ 2262-0414; Rue 24B; s/d/ste US\$96/120/132; ☎) This French colonial building has something of the Spanish hacienda about it. Set within lush gardens, there's an elegant central courtyard with a bar, and breezy comfortable rooms. There's wi-fi.

Lakay (☎ 2262-1442; Blvd de Mer; mains from US\$8; ☎ dinner) One of the busiest restaurants in Cap-Haïtien, and it's not hard to see why. Eat alfresco and load up on generous plates of Creole food, plus a few pizzas. The atmosphere is lively, and at weekends there are often live bands (a cover charge of US\$4 applies).

Getting There & Away

For more information on international and domestic flights to and from Cap-Haïtien, see p277.

The bus station for destinations south including all points on the way to Port-au-Prince (US\$12, seven hours) is at Barrière Bouteille on Rue L. If you're heading to Port-au-Prince, leave early as it's not advisable to arrive in the area of La Saline, where buses terminate, after dark. Taptaps to Milot leave from Rue Lapont; those for Cormier Plage from Rue 21Q.

BEACHES

The road west out of Cap-Haïtien winds through the hills to the northwest of the cape. Here you'll find some of the most beautiful coastal scenery in Haiti, with lush forested hills tumbling into the Atlantic Ocean.

The road hits the north coast of the cape near the lovely beach of **Cormier Plage** and ends on the western edge of **Plage Labadie**, a small walled-off peninsula and the only place in Haiti where cruise ships visit.

Cormier Plage Resort (☎ 3528-1110; cormier@hughes.net; s/d with half board US\$106/168; ☎) is one of Haiti's best resorts, with a renowned seafood restaurant. A short boat-taxi hop from Labadie is **Norm's Place** (www.normsplacelabadee.com; r per person US\$25; ☎), a restored fort-cum-guesthouse.

Taptaps from Cap-Haïtien (US\$0.75, 30 minutes) travel through Cormier Plage and terminate at Labadie.

THE CITADELLE & SANS SOUCI

Henri Christophe's twin triumphs, the Citadelle and Sans Souci palace, are a short taptap ride from Cap-Haïtien, on the edge of the town of Milot (US\$0.45, one hour).

Built in 1813 as a rival to the splendors of Versailles in France, Christophe's elegant palace of **Sans Souci** has lain abandoned since an earthquake ruined it in 1842. The years of neglect have left it partially reclaimed by the tropical environment, creating a wonderfully bizarre and evocative monument.

From Sans Souci, it's a 5km walk to the Citadelle, situated in the Parc Nationale Historique La Citadelle. If you have a vehicle, you can drive another 3.5km to a parking area at the foot of the Citadelle.

It took Christophe 15 years to build the World Heritage-listed **Citadelle**, a vast mountaintop fortress, constructed to combat another invasion by the French. It is one of the most inspiring sights in the Caribbean. The astounding structure was completed in 1820, having employed up to 20,000 people, many of whom died during the arduous task. With 4m-thick walls that reach heights of 40m, the fortress was impenetrable. The views are breathtaking.

Combined entrance tickets (US\$5) are sold from an office close to Sans Souci. If you wish to ascend by horse, the rate is US\$10 per horse. The sight of a foreigner invariably attracts a throng of would-be guides and horse-wranglers eager for your custom so be prepared for some hassle.

In Milot, the **Lakou Lakay** (☎ 2262-5189, 3667-6070; meals US\$10) cultural center is building accommodation, and welcomes lunch guests (call ahead) with drumming, dancing and a huge Creole feast.

DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodations aren't fantastic value in Haiti. There are few budget hotels aimed at foreigners, and those at the cheapest end frequently double up as brothels. A decent budget hotel weighs in at around US\$40; a midrange hotel should cost about US\$70, for which you should get hot water, air-con and a decent electricity supply. Room standards can be highly variable. Port-au-Prince has the best choice, from good international standard hotels to cheap Christian-run guesthouses that can be excellent value.

Many hotels add an electricity surcharge of US\$5 to US\$10 to the daily rate, included in

the prices listed here. Midrange and top-end rates also include the 10% government tax added to the bill.

ACTIVITIES

While not as developed as in other parts of the Caribbean, Haiti still has some great opportunities for snorkeling and scuba diving. The Côte des Arcadins has the best sites, including Amani, near St-Marc, where a wall descends to the home of the elephant's ear, believed to be the world's largest sea sponge. On the north coast, sites near the beach resort of Cormier Plage also offer rich diving possibilities.

Haiti's mountainous terrain lends itself well to hiking. A short drive from Port-au-Prince, the Parc National La Visite (p270) offers good trekking country, with superb views and cool pine forests to explore, along with many high-altitude bird species. Birders will also be amply rewarded by a visit to Trou Caïman (p270), and the wild Parc National Macaya (p272).

BOOKS

Libeté: A Haiti Anthology, edited by Charles Arthur and Michael Dash, is an excellent primer on Haitian history, society, culture and politics, collecting writings on the country from Columbus to the present day.

Full of vivid detail and meticulous portraits, Ian Thomson's *Bonjour Blanc* covers the author's often hair-raising travels through Haiti during the turmoil of the early 1990s.

Almost every visitor to Haiti reads Graham Greene's *The Comedians* at some stage. Set in Haiti during the reign of Papa Doc Duvalier, it's a somber and acid portrayal of life under a dictatorship.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks are usually open from 8:30am to 1pm weekdays, with larger branches also open from 2pm to 5pm weekdays. Shops and offices usually open at 7am and close at 4pm weekdays, often closing earlier on Friday; most shops are also open on Saturday. Government offices are open 7am to 4pm weekdays, closing for an hour at midday.

Local restaurants open for food around 8am, with lunchtime being the busy period; they generally close around 9pm. More expensive restaurants keep more traditional hours; they often close in the afternoon, but are open as late as 11pm. Many restaurants are closed on Sundays.

PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspapers** *Le Matin*, *Le Nouvelliste*, *Haiti Progrés* (has an English section), *Haiti en Marche*, and *Libète* (Creole). International press available in Port-au-Prince.
- **Radio** Stations include Radio Haiti Inter (106.1FM), Radio Soleil (107.5FM) and Radio Ibo (98.5FM). French and US TV available on satellite/cable.
- **Electricity** Haiti uses the same electrical system as the USA and Canada (110V to 125V AC, 60Hz, flat-pronged plugs). Power cuts are ubiquitous, along with the sound of generators.
- **Weights & Measures** Haiti uses the metric system, although gasoline is sold in gallons.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Haiti has rarely enjoyed a good media image abroad. Poverty and regular political turmoil play their part, and many governments currently advise against travel to the country.

The presence of UN soldiers has done much to bring stability to Haiti, especially in dealing with the gang and kidnapping problem. But always keep your ear to the ground for current developments before traveling – trouble generally occurs around elections, although it's incredibly rare for foreigners to get caught up in it. Avoid demonstrations, and if you come across one, turn in the opposite direction.

A weak state and high poverty levels can foster street crime. Take advantage of hotel safes and don't carry anything you're not willing to lose (or money in your back pocket).

For all this, the main annoyance travelers are likely to face are the poor electricity supply and crazy traffic. Beggars can be persistent in some places, and at tourist spots such as the Citadelle expect persistent attention from faux guides. Try to discourage them before you set off – their only function seems to be to tell you how much tip you're going to have to pay at the end – as it's very hard to not pay them after they've run up a mountain alongside you.

Finally, while taking care to be sensible, it's important not to get too hung up on Haiti's bad name. Many travelers fear the worst and avoid the country; those who do make it here are more likely to come away with positive impressions rather than horror stories.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

All the embassies and consulates listed here are in Port-au-Prince or Pétionville. Australia, New Zealand and Ireland do not have diplomatic representation in Haiti.

Brazil (☎ 2256-6206; fax 2256-6206; 168 Rue Darguin, Place Boyer, Pétionville)

Canada (☎ 2249-9000; fax 2249-9920; between Delmas 75-76, Rte de Delmas, Port-au-Prince)

Cuba (☎ 2256-3811; fax 2257-8566; 3 Rue Marion, Pétionville)

Dominican Republic (☎ 2257-9215; fax 2257-0568; 121 Ave Pan Américaine, Pétionville)

France (☎ 2222-0951; fax 2223-9858; 51 Rue Capois, Port-au-Prince)

Germany (☎ 2256-4131; fax 2257-4131; 2 Impasse Claudinette, Bois Moquette, Pétionville)

Japan (☎ 2245-5875; fax 2245-834; 2 Impasse Tulipe, Croix Desprez, Port-au-Prince)

Netherlands (☎ 2222-0955; fax 2222-0955; Rue Belleville, Parc Shodecosa, Port-au-Prince) Off Rte Nationale 1.

Spain (☎ 2245-4411; fax 2245-4410; 54 Rue Pacot, Port-au-Prince)

UK (Hotel Montana, Rue F Cardoza, Port-au-Prince) Currently closed, but may be reopened during the lifetime of this book. It's off Ave Pan Américaine.

USA Rue Oswald Durand (☎ 2223-0989, 2223-8853, 2223-9324, 2223-7011; fax 2223-5515; 104 Rue Oswald Durand, Port-au-Prince); Blvd Harry Truman (☎ 2222-0220/69; fax 2223-1641; Bicentenaire, Blvd Harry Truman, Port-au-Prince),

Venezuela (☎ 2222-0971; fax 2222-3949; 2 Cité de l'Exposition, Blvd Harry Truman, Port-au-Prince)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Carnival is huge in Port-au-Prince. The Jacmel celebrations are equally popular, and are held a week before to avoid clashing. Also watch out for the following Vodou festivals:

Soukri Held on January 6 near Gonaïves.

Souvenance Held on Good Friday near Gonaïves.

Saut d'Eau pilgrimage Held on July 16 at Ville-Bonheur.

Fet Gédé Late at night, in cemeteries across the country, on November 1 and 2.

HOLIDAYS

The following are public holidays in Haiti:

Independence Day January 1

Ancestors' Day January 2

Carnival January/February (three days before Ash Wednesday)

Good Friday March/April

Agriculture and Labor Day May 1

Flag and University Day May 18

Anniversary of Jean-Jacques Dessalines' Death October 17

Anniversary of Toussaint Louverture's Death

November 1

Anniversary of the Battle of Vertières November 18

Christmas Day December 25

INTERNET ACCESS

Getting online isn't a problem, and internet cafés open and close with reckless abandon. Prices range from US\$0.80 to US\$3 per hour. Cheap places don't run generators, making them highly susceptible to the regular power cuts. If you're bringing a laptop, top-end (and some midrange) hotels often provide wi-fi access.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Haiti Info (www.haiti-info.com) Has Haitian resources and a good news wire service.

Haiti Innovation (www.haitiinnovation.org) Runs an interesting commentary on the state of development and aid in Haiti.

Haiti Support Group (<http://haitisupport.gn.apc.org>) A good place to start for Haitian resources

LANGUAGE

The language of law, government and culture is French, although only 10% of the population speak it; everyone else speaks Creole, a blend of European and West African languages evolved from Haiti's slave past. Much Creole vocabulary is borrowed from French.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Port-au-Prince has the best medical facilities and a few international-standard hospitals, but there are decent pharmacies across the country. A foreign-aid program means that there are many Cuban doctors in Haiti.

MONEY

The official currency is the gourde, and there are 100 centimes to 1 gourde. US dollars are also widely accepted for large purchases. The gourde used to be tied to the US dollar at a rate of one to five, with the result that HTG5 is universally known as one Haitian dollar. When buying something, always check whether people are quoting the price in gourdes or Haitian dollars.

Don't bother bringing traveler's checks as they're near impossible to change. There are ATMs in Port-au-Prince, but they can be unreliable (those in Pétionville tend to be better), so always make sure you have some US dollars as backup. Large businesses, most

midrange and all top-end hotels will accept credit cards.

TELEPHONE

Haiti's country code is ☎ 509, but you just dial the eight-digit local number in Haiti. To call from overseas, dial your country's international dialing code + ☎ 509 + the local calling number. We've included only the eight-digit local number in Haiti listings in this chapter. To reach an international operator, dial ☎ 00; for information on international calls, dial ☎ 00-09.

Landlines in Haiti can be very unreliable, and everyone uses cell (mobile) phones; a GSM SIM card for networks like Digicel and Voila will cost around US\$20. You can make calls from Teleco offices, or the ubiquitous phone 'stands' – usually a youth on the street with a cell phone that looks like a regular desk phone.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Haiti's moribund tourist industry offers no useful information to visitors. The official **Maison de Tourisme** (☎ 2222-8659; Rue Capois, Champs de Mars, Port-au-Prince) was closed when we visited, with no known plans to reopen it.

TOURS

Two excellent operators offer countrywide tours and professional fixer services:

Tour Haiti (☎ 3510-2223; www.tourhaiti.net; 115 Rue Faubert, Pétionville)

Voyages Lumière (☎ 2249-6177, 3557-0753)

VISAS

Unless you're a citizen of the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Panama or China, no visa is needed to visit Haiti, just a passport valid for six months and a return ticket. Your entry stamp entitles you to stay for up to 90 days. You'll also be given a green entry card to be produced on departure from Haiti – don't lose this.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 118
- Fire ☎ 117
- Police ☎ 114

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Haiti

All foreign visitors must have a valid passport to enter Haiti. Be sure you have room for both an entry and exit stamp, and that your passport is valid for at least six months beyond your planned travel dates.

Air

Haiti's main hub is **Aéroport International Toussaint Louverture** (PAP; ☎ 2250-1120) in Port-au-Prince, although a few flights also connect Cap-Haïtien to Florida. Horror stories about hassles and bribery at Port-au-Prince's airport are a thing of the past, although arrivals can sometimes be a little chaotic.

The main airlines flying into Haiti:

American Airlines (☎ 2246-0100, 3510-7010; www.a.com) Miami, Fort Lauderdale, New York

Air Canada (☎ 2250-0441/2; www.aircanada.ca) Montreal.

Air France (☎ 2222-1078, 2222-4262; www.airfrance.com) Miami, Paris, Pointe-à-Pitre

Lynx Air (☎ 3513-2597, 2257-9956; www.lynxair.com) Fort Lauderdale

Spirit Airlines (☎ 800-772-7117; www.spiritair.com) Fort Lauderdale

Land

There are three points where you can cross from Haiti into the Dominican Republic. One is near Malpasse/Jimani in the south, on the road that links Port-au-Prince to Santo Domingo. A second crossing point is near Ouanaminthe/Dajabón in the north; it's on a road that connects Cap-Haïtien and Santiago. The third border crossing is at Belladère/Elías Piña. These crossings close at 6pm.

Caribe Tours (☎ 2257-9379; cnr Rues Cerveaux & Gabartt, Pétienville) and **Terra Bus** (☎ 2257-2153; Ave Pan Américaine, Pétienville) have daily coach departures to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic (US\$40, nine hours). From Cap-Haïtien, **Ayido Tours** (☎ 3729-8711, 3556-3082) runs a direct coach service to Santiago in the Dominican Republic every Wednesday and Saturday from the Hôtel Mont Joli.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Caribintair (☎ 250-2031/2; caribintair@accesshaiti.com),

Tortug Air (☎ 2250-2555/6; tortugair@yahoo.com) and

Tropical Airways (☎ 2256-3626/7) link Port-au-

Prince to several departmental capitals, including Cap-Haïtien, Les Cayes, Jacmel and Jérémie. Haiti's size means that flights are short (just 15 minutes to Jacmel), saving hours on bad roads. The planes are small and demand can be high, so book as far in advance as possible. One-way tickets usually cost around the US\$85 mark.

Boat

There are quite a few islands and remote areas around Haiti accessible only by ferry. Routes include Port-au-Prince to Jérémie and Côte des Arcadins to Île de la Gonâve. Boats are rarely comfortable and often dangerously overcrowded. In some areas, such as Labadie and Île-à-Vache, small boats operate as water taxis. Fix the price before you board, as the owner may try to charge for the whole boat.

Bus & Taptap

Haiti's buses are big and seemingly indestructible affairs, and they need to be. They're cheap too – even the longest 12-hour trip gives change from US\$15. There are no timetables; buses leave when filled. A taptap is more likely to be a minibus or pickup truck, used for travel within cities, or hopping between towns. Bus and taptap stations are sprawling conglomerations of vehicles and people and market stalls: Haiti in microcosm.

Car & Motorcycle

Driving in Haiti is an adventure sport. Roads can be terrible, traffic signs are rare, and 'might is right' is the main rule. If you do drive, you will need an International Driving Permit or a current license from your home country.

There are rental companies in Port-au-Prince, mostly near the airport. Fees are around US\$70 per day for a saloon, and US\$150 per day for a 4WD, the latter being better able to cope with the road conditions.

Taxi

Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haïtien have collective taxis called *publiques*, which run along set routes and charge around HTG25 (US\$0.75) per trip. You can spot them by the red ribbon on the mirror – if the driver takes it off he's treating you as a private commission, and you'll have to negotiate the fee.

There are motorcycle taxis (moto-taxis) everywhere, with a trip rarely costing more than about HTG20 (US\$0.60).

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