

MUSEUMS & ARCHEOLOGY

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The Dominican Republic (DR) has a rich and storied history that traces back over 8,000 years to the arrival of the Taino Indians. Following the island's discovery by Christopher Columbus in 1492, the Republic had epic interaction with the Spanish, French, Haitians and Africans. It's no wonder, then, how the DR came to boast such an impressive collection of personal and cultural relics from centuries past. The country has done a magnificent job of maintaining and preserving these artifacts as well as the historical structures in which they're housed. Visiting the DR's major cities, especially Santo Domingo, tourists can easily become engrossed in the historical legends that accompany some of the oldest museums and archeological sites in the New World.

The DR also has a unique collection of natural rocks and gems that can only be found on the island. Near Barahona, a turquoise-blue pectolite stone known as larimar has been cultivated from the volcanic rock that once formed the island. The country's most popular gem, amber, is the result of tree sap that hardened millions of years ago, sometimes capturing small plants, animals and insects inside. These two geological imprints are used in jewelry, sometimes together and other times in single pieces.

The country's museums and archeological sites intrigue adults and provide a historical lesson for children. From jewelry to religious artifacts, castles to caves, each venue showcases a vastly different aspect of the island's colorful heritage.

Museums (non-art)

North Coast

Amber Museum

61 Duarte Street, Playa Dorada, Puerto Plata

Phone: 809-586-2848

Hours: Open 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday

This two-story Victorian museum is thought to contain a collection of the world's most transparent amber. Well-preserved plants, insects and animals that were captured in prehistoric tree sap are on display.

www.ambermuseum.com

Insider's tip – The Puerto Plata amber museum contains the famous amber mosquito seen in the box-office hit, "Jurassic Park."

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La Isabela Museum

A new museum and educational center focusing on Christopher Columbus' discovery of Hispaniola in 1492 are in the works and will be housed at La Isabela. The seaside village is the site of adventurer's first settlement in the new world.

Jewish Museum

Sosua

This museum is a tribute to the 700 Jewish refugees taken in by former president Rafael Trujillo in 1938 during the Nazi occupation of Germany. Exhibits showcase photos and personal memorabilia of the settlers and the dairy manufacturing facilities they developed in town.

East Coast

Altos de Chavon Regional Museum of Archaeology

Within Casa de Campo in La Romana

Hours: Open 9 a.m. - 8 p.m. daily

Located on the Chavon River, this museum boasts a collection of more than 3,000 artifacts from the native Taino Indians who once inhabited the region.

South Central Coast

Museo de las Casas Reales (Museum of the Royal Houses)

Calle Las Damas, Santo Domingo

Phone: (809) 682-4202

Hours: Open 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. daily

Once the 16th century governor's Supreme Court, this museum documents Santo Domingo's rich history with tapestries, maps and other artifacts from 1492 to 1821.

Alcázar de Colón (Castle of Columbus)

Colonial Zone, Santo Domingo

Phone: (809) 686-8657

Hours: Open 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. Monday through Sunday

This palace, including artifacts from the Columbus family, was built in the 1500's by Christopher's son, Diego and his wife.

<http://rsta.pucmm.edu.do/ciudad/alcazar/Website>

Insider's tip: Following a tour of Alcazar de Colon, venture out onto the Alcazar strip of restaurants and shops to enjoy delicious local fare and atmosphere.

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Museo Del Hombre Dominicano (Museum of the Dominican Man)

Plaza de la Cultura, Santo Domingo

Phone: 809-686-2145

Set in the Plaza de la Cultura, this museum is reputed to have the country's best collection of pre-Columbian artifacts including jewelry, religious pieces and sculptures. A favorite exhibit explains the effects of African slavery with displays of voodoo artifacts and carnival costumes.

Museo Nacional de Historia y Geografia (Museum of History and Geography)

Plaza de la Cultura, Santo Domingo

Phone : 809-686-2145

Hours : Open 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday

This museum contains a thorough collection of artifacts that contributed to the country's historical timeline. Displays highlight the DR's first inhabitants, American occupation and interaction with Haiti.

Museo de Larimar (Museum of Larimar)

54 Calle Isabel la Catolica, Santo Domingo

Phone: 809-689-6605

Hours: Open 8 a.m. – 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. – 2 p.m. Sunday

This new museum explains the island's mining and jewelry industry. Exhibits demonstrate the extraction, shaping and jewelry-making processes of larimar.

www.larimarmuseum.com/

Museo de la Familia Dominicana del Siglo XIX (Museum of the Dominican Family of the 19th Century)

Casa de Tostado, Calle Arzobispo Merino, Santo Domingo

Hours : Open 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday

Built in 1503, this colonial mansion exhibits artifacts and personal belongings of a 19th century well-to-do Santo Domingo family. While its contents are intriguing, the best part of the museum is the house itself, which has the only double Gothic window in North or South America.

Taino Indian Sites

Caves played an important role in the lives of the Taino Indians. In fact, their creation myth is centered around a cave located on the island. Stories of the Taino interaction with various plants, animals, spirits and each other can be seen in the elaborate pictographs and stone carvings within the structures. Other Taino artifacts are housed at museums and even an excavated burial ground at a local beach.

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North Coast

La Isabela

This Taino museum illustrates the way these natives lived, ate, prepared food and sustained themselves day-to-day. Visitors can examine a mock thatched hut and sample crops.

National Park Jaragua, Barahona

This park contains some of the oldest Taino Indian sites on the island. Cave the Poza and the Mongó Cave, within the park, display pictographs and petroglyphs of their time.

Southwest Coast

Museo Prehispanico

A Taino museum, located in Santo Domingo, this museum showcases objects from daily life such as jewelry, pottery and ritual items are on display. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Las Caritas

Deep in the southwest corner of the country, on Lago Enriquillo, is Las Caritas. This cave is rumored to have hidden Taino leader Enriquillo from the Spanish during their conflict with the native people in the early 1500's. The cave also contains dozens of small chiseled faces into the rock walls that seem to come alive to all who enter it.

East Coast

Jose Maria Cave

Located far into the Parque Nacional del Este near La Romana, this limestone cave holds 1,200 Taino paintings depicting mythological events and a peace offering for the Spaniards in 1503.

Penon Gordo, Bayahibe

Penon Gordo is one of 200 caves in the Parque Nacional del Este. This cave displays a chiseled guardian figure at the entrance of the cave and several Taino paintings.

Insider's tip: To get a full-tour of the Taino sites in Parque Nacional del Este, including some areas that are unknown to tour operators, hire a park ranger as a guide to any of the caves.

El Pomier Caves

Located north of San Cristobal, visitors can view the Caribbean's largest collection of Taino cave art. Scenes of spirits, rituals and objects of Taino belief are included in the drawings. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

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Cueva de las Maravillas

Located within San Pedro de Macoris, these caves contain nearly 500 Taino pictographs and petroglyphs. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Parque Submarino La Caleta

This national park reveals an excavated Taino burial ground with several skeletons on display at the beach. Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Los Indios de Chacuey

Known as the Stonehenge of the Caribbean, a similar circular formation of rocks surrounding a stone slab indicates a possible Taino ceremonial center.

Northeast Coast

Parque Nacional Los Haitises

Accessible only by an organized boat trip due to the swamps and rocky terrain that surround them, these caves display drawings of various animals and human faces. A standard boat trip, on the Ruta Litoral takes tourists on a two-and-a-half hour boat tour that visits three main caves within the park.

To learn more about the parks that house these historic Taino caves, visit:

<http://www.hispaniola.com/dominicanvacation/parks.html>

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