

DOMINICAN MUSIC AND DANCE

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Passing through the streets of the Dominican Republic (DR), visitors are sure to notice the handmade posters that hang from telephone poles promoting an upcoming merengue or bachata night at a nearby venue. Continue walking and it doesn't take long to realize that music acts as the soundtrack of the country and its people, often heard blaring from vehicles, stores, restaurants and houses. After sunset, the pulsing beats fill the air with life and draw locals and tourists alike toward the crowded dance floors of the world's hottest night clubs. A way of life on the island, Dominicans view dancing as an art and take pride in sharing their native movements with others. Salsa, Latin jazz and other types of dance music can be heard in the country, but are not as popular as their beloved merengue and bachata counterparts.

Merengue

The country's national dance, traditional merengue groups are comprised of a three-piece band including a melodeon (accordion-like instrument), a guira (a scraped percussion piece) and a tambora (double-headed drum); however, it has expanded to incorporate other instruments such as the saxophone, trumpets, violin, flute and piano. Its tempo is characterized by an aggressive beat, requiring its dancers to swing their hips in rapid, fluid motions and make sure their feet follow suit. Early merengue's lyrics were based on sexual encounters and other socially taboo subjects, thus preventing it from becoming widely accepted. Today, merengue's lyrics cover more general topics including politics and current events. Its music has become so popular, in fact, that it is honored with two regional festivals each year.

Although its true origins remain disputed, merengue combines a mixture of African and European elements. Others claim that merengue is a purely Dominican form, developed by a soldier named Tomas Torres after the country's victory at the battle of Talanquera. Another shaping influence was the country's interaction with Germany, a major trading partner, who familiarized the DR with the accordion.

Merengue remained out of favor with lower class society during the early 1900's because of its nature. Artists including Juan Espinola, Julio Alberto Hernandez and Juan F. García were unsuccessful in their attempts to make merengue mainstream with the lyrics as they were. Following a reduction in tempo from its original form (to accommodate American soldiers who were in the country between 1916 and 1924 and couldn't keep up with the fast-pace of the dance), the merengue began to take-off. Major mainstream acceptance started with the rise of former President Rafeal Trujillo in 1930 thanks to his perpetual promotion of the merengue to his followers. Born into a relatively poor family, Trujillo identified with those

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who were also kept from attending upper-class clubs and events and thus made the music the social status symbol of his fellow citizens. In fact, several merengue songs written during his presidency used his dictatorship as a topic. Throughout the 60's, 70's and 80's, popular artists continued to develop merengue further by adding their own touches to the tempo and lyrical nature. Johnny Ventura and Wilfrido Vargas, who had top hits during those decades, are considered some of the best merengue musicians in history. Today, artists like Juan Luis Guerra peak the charts.

Bachata

A much slower dance than the merengue, bachata emerged in the rural areas of the island during the 1960's. It was derived from bolero, a music genre native to Cuba, and is compared to country or R&B music of the United States. Originally popular with the poor or lower classes, bachata is characterized by guitar-based melodies rather than large bands. Its lyrics are mostly about relationships and hard times.

The word bachata developed after the wealthier classes used the word to describe rowdy lower-class parties and the people who attended them. Before bachata groups were able to take advantage of the Dominican music and recording industry, it was common to see small groups strumming guitars and singing at street-side bachatas.

During the 70's and 80's, the economic hardships experienced by the rural and poor could be heard in the beat and lyrics of bachata. Words reflected negative attitudes toward women and promoted drinking and other taboo forms of behavior. Like merengue, bachata was viewed as too inappropriate to be considered mainstream but was forbidden until fairly recently when the lyrical content became more appropriate. Now, it is experiencing a resurgence in tourist and rural areas and is liked by all classes. Bachata artists are even beginning to appear in the media and on hit music lists.

Well-known Dominican bachata artists include Aventura, Luis Vargas, Anthony Santos, Joe Veras, and Raulin Rodriguez.

Enjoying Dominican Music and Dance

Travelers from across the globe journey to the DR each year, joining local attendees, for annual music festivals after falling in love with the addictive rhythms.

Santo Domingo Merengue Festival

The week-long Santo Domingo Merengue Festival is held during the last week of July or the first week of

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August every year at the Malecon. The seaside Dominican musical showcase encourages drinking, eating and dancing.

Puerto Plata Merengue Festival

Puerto Plata hosts a week-long celebration of merengue acts usually during the third week in October or November every year. More than 100,000 tourists and locals gather at outdoor bars and in the streets to listen to performers and partake in the festivities.

Dominican Republic Jazz Festival

The festival is staged at three scenic north coast locations: Cabarete, Sosua and Puerto Plata each October. Renowned musical acts ranging from Enrique Iglesias to Ricky Martin have appeared in years past. www.drjazzfestival.com.

To practice or observe the merengue, bachata or other forms of Latin dance, the following popular nightspots provide an atmosphere that will have everyone moving 'til dawn. Anyone doubting their two left feet can feel at ease about asking a local expert to demonstrate the correct steps. However, in hopes of making sure all visitors leave with the ability to dance like a pro, it's the locals who will probably be the first to approach.

South Central Coast

Jet Set

Independencia 2253

Santo Domingo

Open 10 p.m. until late daily

Enjoy live merengue bands on Mondays and other enticing Latin music from midnight 'til dawn.

Loft Lounge & Dance Club

Tiradentes 44, Naco

Santo Domingo

Open 10 p.m. until late

A popular venue for leading merengue bands. Fernando Villanova and Los Hermanos Rosario have made past appearances. Salsa, international pop music and DJs also provide entertainment.

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Aire

Calle Mercedes

Santo Domingo

Open 10 p.m. until late Wednesday through Sunday

Popular gay club with themed party nights. Wednesday is foam party night, Saturday is a message party and Sundays are known for drag and exotic dancing shows.

North Coast

Las Brisas

Calle Principal

Cabarete

Open 8 a.m. until late

A beachside hot-spot serving Tex-Mex dishes, lively merengue and bachata. A good time for guests of all ages.

Crazy Moon

Paradise Beach Resort

Playa Dorada

Open 10 p.m. – 4 a.m. Monday through Saturday

A favorite bar and disco for both locals and tourists. Merengue, salsa and other international music draws patrons to the dance floor.

Mangu

Occidental Allegro Jack Tar Resort

Playa Dorada

Known to the locals as the best night club along the north coast, patrons come dressed to impress and ready to interact with all who are present.

D'Classico

Calle Pedro Clisante

Sosua

Open 10 p.m. until late

Merengue, bachata and Latin rock is rotated during the week. Weekends draw friendly local teens who enjoy teaching tourists the island's native dances.