

Haiti



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Haiti History

THE HAITIAN SLAVE REVOLUTION

At the end of the 18th century, Haiti – the French colony of St-Domingue – was the ‘Pearl of the Antilles.’ The most valuable colony in the world, it was flush with sugar and coffee wealth, produced by the sweat and blood of half a million African slaves. But France itself was on the cusp of revolution, and when the Bastille was stormed in 1789, the struggle for *liberté* also opened the door for Haitian slaves to grab their independence.

The French Revolution didn’t initially abolish slavery, but it inspired St-Domingue’s growing mulatto class to travel to Paris to demand political representation. White colonists were already split between revolutionaries and royalists, the government was threatening to turn into anarchy and the country was a tinderbox. A mulatto uprising led by Vincent Ogé was crushed, but the revolutionary fires had spread beyond the slave owners to their slaves. At Bois Caïman, the Vodou priest Boukman led a ceremony that saw the north erupting into a full-blown slave revolt (see the boxed text, p335). Lasting two years, the revolt saw slaves, mulattoes and whites both fighting and forming brief alliances against each other.

Out of the chaos stepped François Dominique Toussaint Louverture. His slave army had sought support from Santo Domingo, which sought to weaken France’s hold on the island. St-Domingue’s planters were so wedded to slavery that they turned to the hated British for support against the revolution, who landed a massive invasion force from Jamaica. But when Revolutionary Paris formally abolished slavery, Toussaint allied his slave army to the motherland. With his generals Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe, he crushed the British and brought the colony under his firm control.

Toussaint didn’t stop there, and in 1801 he invaded Santo Domingo to free the Spanish slaves. Napoleon, who had taken control in France, saw that as a step too far and divined that the free slaves would eventually want complete freedom from France. He wanted a return to slavery instead, and a year later the French invaded. The guerrilla war was immensely costly. Over half the soldiers died of tropical diseases, with losses reaching 40,000 before a truce was agreed. Toussaint again pledged allegiance to France if slavery was forever abandoned, but was imprisoned and shipped to France.

It was France’s final gambit. Dessalines raised the country in anger again, promising full independence as the slaves’ reward. In a bloody campaign he beat the French for a final time at Vertières, and on New Year’s Day 1804 in Gonaïve proclaimed St-Domingue dead. Haiti, the old Taíno name for the island, was chosen for the world’s first black republic, and only the second modern nation (after the USA) to break the yoke of European colonialism.

For the history of Hispaniola prior to Haitian independence, see p29.

‘In overthrowing me, you have cut down in St-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up by the roots again for they are numerous and deep.’

TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE FOLLOWING HIS ARREST BY THE FRENCH, 1802

TIMELINE

1791

A Vodou ceremony held by slaves at Bois Caïman near Cap-Haïtien preaches the message of emancipation, sparking a slave rebellion that sets St-Domingue’s plantations ablaze.

1793

Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe and Jean-Jacques Dessalines lead slave armies against the French and mulattoes. Amid the confusion, Britain invades, hoping to grab the island for itself.

1794-96

Slavery is abolished in the colony, and Toussaint Louverture rejoins French forces to repel the British. After bringing St-Domingue under his control, Toussaint is appointed governor-general.

TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE

The son of an African chief, yet born into slavery near modern Cap-Haïtien, François Dominique Toussaint Louverture was one of the most remarkable figures of the 18th century. He worked as a steward and, unusually, was granted something of an education. He read voraciously, although was never a competent writer. When the fires of rebellion reached St-Domingue he was ready to grab their ideals and lead the slaves to liberty.

Although untrained militarily, he was a naturally gifted tactician and inspired great successes against the colonist militias, and both the invading English and French armies. Toussaint was astute enough to try to keep the valuable plantations intact and went out of his way to woo the white planters to his cause, and for a while was feted by revolutionary whites, blacks and mulattoes alike. But he could be ruthless, too – ordering the torching of Cap-Français to prevent it falling into enemy hands, and enacting forced labor to prop up the economy (thus alienating many of his followers).

Toussaint was a product of the French Revolution as much as Robespierre was. For a long time he saw a free St-Domingue as part of France, and only late in the day saw that independence was the only option for the slaves. It took the more ruthless Dessalines to declare a free Haiti, one reason why he, rather than Toussaint, is often more celebrated in modern Haiti. But Toussaint was the real architect of the revolution. Even as Napoleon was deriding him as ‘the gilded African’ and leaving him to rot in jail, the poet Wordsworth was dedicating sonnets to him. Today Toussaint’s statue stands aptly in Port-au-Prince between the National Palace and the statue of the Marron Inconnu, ‘Unknown Slave’.

Haiti was ravaged. In 13 years of war the economy was shattered and nearly a third of the population dead or displaced. Dessalines followed up by massacring the remaining whites, for fear of being reconquered. To take full charge he announced himself emperor and ruled as a dictator. Free, educated mulattoes were spurned, and the laborers forced back onto the plantations to rebuild the economy. His rule was brutal, and the reaction inevitable. In 1806, after being born free in Africa and having endured the Middle Passage, Dessalines died an emperor in a murderous ambush outside Port-au-Prince.

NORTH AGAINST SOUTH

Dessalines was the glue holding Haiti together, and on his death the country promptly split in two. General Alexandre Pétion took control of Port-au-Prince and became president of the mulatto-dominated southern Republic of Haiti. Henri Christophe, who saw himself as Dessalines’s rightful successor retreated to the north and crowned himself king. The two rulers had very different ideas on how to rule.

Christophe ruled with absolute power, but was an enlightened and effective monarch. Within a year, he had stabilized the economy with a new

currency, the gourde, and reformed the judicial system. Seeing education as pivotal, he constructed several schools, backed up with a state printing press. He built a splendid palace at Sans Souci and the awesome Citadelle la Ferrière (p338) near Cap-Haïtien, and created an instant nobility, parceling out land to the new dukes and barons.

All this was supported by serfs, who weren’t particularly happy that Christophe had kept them tied to the hated plantations, even if they were now earning a wage. As time went on and the building of the Citadelle progressed, Christophe’s megalomania increased and his nobles began to plot against him. But as revolt began to spark in 1820, Christophe suffered a massive stroke. Rather than face the dual indignities of infirmity and rebellion he shot himself in the heart with a silver bullet.

Pétion’s south took a different direction altogether. A political liberal, he faced black guerrillas, a secessionist movement in the far southwest and a restive army. His answer was massive land reform. Recognizing the plantation system was no longer feasible, he divided and distributed the land into small plots. While many of his generals grabbed the largest slices of land, redistribution allowed Pétion to resettle his soldiers and, even more importantly, placate the peasantry. Liberty was associated with the possession of a small plot of land, and Pétion is still remembered as ‘Papa Bon-Coeur’ (Papa Good-Heart) for his actions.

Land reform had unforeseen consequences. The move to subsistence peasant farming meant loss of revenues for the state, and the republic stagnated in comparison to the north. The mulattoes became mercantilists and frequently saw government as a way of enriching their own pockets. Haiti’s two classes began to take separate paths.

UNITED, BUT NOT FREE?

It took the deaths of both Pétion and Christophe for Haiti to be joined again under one flag. Jean-Pierre Boyer, Pétion’s chosen successor, was the man to do it. Christophe’s kingdom in the north was abolished and the republic began to look to the future. Unfortunately, Boyer’s rule laid many of the foundations of Haiti’s current problems.

Born a free mulatto, Boyer had no great love for the blacks, and immediately wrecked Christophe’s vision of an educated black ruling class by dismantling his education system, thus consolidating mulatto rule. Christophe’s economic plans met with more approval, and Boyer sought to maintain the plantation system of forced labor until a shortage of soldiers to back up his plans demanded a change of heart. Haitian peasantry had become wedded to the idea of land-ownership, turning into sharecroppers selling their surplus at local markets. Sugar cultivation virtually disappeared, and as the population increased so did the demand for land, opening the door to forest clearance, soil erosion and ultimate environmental degradation.

‘The freedom of the negroes, if recognized in St-Domingue and legalized by France, would at all times be a rallying point for freedom-seekers of the New World’.

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE COMMENTS ON THE SLAVE REVOLUTION

When Christophe became king he created an instantly nobility among his followers, including such luminaries as the Count of Limonade and the Duke of Marmalade, each with their own coat of arms.

‘Pluck the chicken but make sure it doesn’t squawk.’

JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES FREQUENTLY FOLLOWED ADVICE ON HOW TO RULE (AND PLUNDER) HAITI

The Louverture Project (<http://thelouvertureproject.org>) is a highly useful online resource covering the history of the Haitian revolution.

1802

France invades St-Domingue. Invited to a parley with the French general Leclerc, Toussaint Louverture is clapped in irons and shipped to prison in France, where he dies of neglect the following year.

1804

Following his overwhelming victory at the Battle of Vertières, Jean-Jacques Dessalines declares Haitian independence, and rips the white stripe from the French Tricolour to create the new country’s flag.

1807

Haiti splits in two. Henri Christophe crowns himself ruler of the new Kingdom of Haiti in the north, while Alexandre Pétion is declared president of the southern Republic of Haiti.

1820

Henri Christophe commits suicide in Sans Souci. The president of the south, Jean-Pierre Boyer, reunites the country as one republic. Two years later, the Haitian army invades Santo Domingo and abolishes slavery, unifying Hispaniola.

1825

France finally recognizes Haitian independence, after Port-au-Prince agrees to reparations for French slavers’ losses incurred during the revolution. The indemnity accounts for 10 times Haiti’s annual revenue, turning Haiti into a debtor nation.

1844

Following years of suppression of Spanish culture and the Catholic Church, Santo Domingo takes advantage of the confusion following President Boyer’s ouster, and declares independence as the Dominican Republic.

But economics would be for nothing if Haiti couldn't remain independent, and so Boyer sought rapprochement with France. The deal eventually struck was Faustian. The old colonial planters were still smarting from their losses, and demanded compensation of 150 million francs. Although this was reduced to 60 million, it bankrupted the state, which was forced to take out huge loans (from French banks) to pay the debt. The world's first black republic took on the first Third World debt.

It took the rest of the century to pay off the loan. Exporting coffee, cocoa and tropical hardwood spurred further land clearance. The rest of the world hardly rushed to follow France's recognition. Haiti was the ultimate bad example – black slaves kicking out their masters to run their own affairs. Boyer advertised in American newspapers for runaway slaves to settle in Haiti, and the USA only recognized Haiti in 1862 during its own civil war, when American slave emancipation was finally on the cards.

Boyer was overthrown in 1843, having presided over Haiti's bankruptcy, a weakening of state machinery and the entrenchment of the rich mulatto/poor black divide. Haiti slipped into a political morass, with a revolving door of short-lived presidents, political generals and even 10 years as an 'empire.' 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.

AMERICAN OCCUPATION

Haiti's strategic proximity to the newly opened Panama Canal reignited the USA's interest in Haiti in the early 20th century. Political instability and increased German interests in the country led the US to take its chance. When President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam was killed by a Port-au-Prince mob in 1915, the US sent in the marines.

The USA immediately began to remodel Haiti in line with its own interests. Dessalines' constitutional ban on foreign land ownership was ripped up and American companies flooded in. The country was declared open for business, and to aid investment a massive infrastructure building program was begun. The army was abolished and replaced with an American-trained force.

Unfortunately for the Americans, the Haitians didn't take to being turned back into a colony. To build the public works, the Americans instituted the hated *corvée*, labor gangs of conscripted peasants, roped together and forced to work. It was all too reminiscent of slavery, and provoked the two-year Chacos Rebellion led by Charlemagne Pèralte. It was brutally suppressed, with the new US air force used to support the marines fighting in the mountainous interior. Only the mulattoes, mindful of their economic supremacy, dealt openly with the occupiers.

The media played an important role on both sides. From the US came waves of dime-store novels and the new movies playing up Haiti as primi-

tive, black and Vodou-ridden. The black middle classes responded with the development of the Noirisme (or Indigeniste) movement. Simultaneously a literary and political movement, it rejected the 'European' values of the mulatto elite and advocated that Haitian citizens take pride in their African heritage. Creole and Vodou were reclaimed as sources of inspiration and cultural identity. Noirisme was hugely influential. One of its leading proponents was Dr François Duvalier (later to reappear as Haiti's most notorious president). It reverberates even today on the canvases on Haitian's leading naïve painters.

The US pulled out in 1934. Stability had apparently been returned, but puppet presidents and a pro-American military were to be more lasting legacies. Most Haitians remained no better off than before, and thousands migrated to seek work in sugarcane fields in the Dominican Republic. Dominican memories of Haiti's own occupation of their country preceded them. Competition for jobs and institutional racism culminated in the killing of around 20,000 Haitians by the Dominican army in 1937. Many of the deaths occurred along the tragically named Rivière Massacre on the border.

PAPADOCRACY: HAITI & THE DUVALIERS

Economic disarray continued into the 1940s. The elite squashed the attempts of progressive black president Dumarais Estimé to redress Haiti's inequalities, and corrupt military-backed rule remained the order of the day. In 1957, however, a black country doctor named François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier swept national elections on a Noiriste platform. The masses thought salvation lay ahead, while the elite saw another potential front man to do their bidding. Both were cruelly mistaken.

Power was Duvalier's *raison-d'être*, and his soft-spoken demeanor belied a ruthless streak. Knowing real power lay with force of arms, he set up his own gangs of thugs that eventually evolved into the feared Tontons Macoutes militia. He led attacks on vested mulatto interests, the church and the unions, and practiced divide-and-rule among the military. Government was eviscerated, with local rule devolved to loyal section chiefs who acted as feudal lords over the population. At the same time Cold War hysteria allowed Papa Doc to paint himself as a brave anticommunist and gain the grateful support of the US. Anyone who stood in his way – whether officers considering a coup or simple peasants sick of extortion – was open to a visit from the Tontons Macoutes. Thousands were killed or simply disappeared.

In 1964 Papa Doc declared himself President for Life. His coterie enriched themselves at Haiti's expense, while the rest of the country lived in fear and paranoia – the 'nightmare republic' of Graham Greene's novel *The Comedians*.

The joke turned even blacker in 1971 when Papa Doc died, leaving his playboy son Jean-Claude as his successor. The new president for life was less

In the 1990s President Aristide campaigned (unsuccessfully) for France to repay the 'blood money' it demanded for recognition of Haiti's independence in 1825.

First published in 1938, *The Black Jacobins*, by CLR James, remains the classic work describing the Haitian slave revolt and the path to independence.

Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones* movingly recreates the events around the 1937 massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic.

'When [Haitians] ask me, 'Who is our Mother?' I tell them, 'The Virgin.' But when they ask, 'Who is our Father?' then I must answer, 'No one – you have only me.'

FRANÇOIS 'PAPA DOC' DUVALIER, 1963

Papa Doc's feared security thugs were named after Tonton Macoute ('Uncle Knapsack'), the child-snatching bogeyman of Haitian folklore.

1847

Head of the presidential guard Faustin Soulouque crowns himself emperor, in imitation of Jean-Jacques Dessalines. His failed attempts to reconquer the Dominican Republic bankrupt the state and, in 1860, cost him his crown.

1915

The USA invades Haiti, starting a 20-year occupation. Aimed at stabilizing the country, US marines introduce forced labor gangs to build infrastructure and realign the economy toward American interests.

1918

Charlemagne Pèralte launches the Cacos Rebellion, a peasant uprising across northern Haiti aimed at ending the US occupation. It lasts two years, finally ending with the capture and execution of Pèralte.

1928-31

The novel *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (Thus Spoke the Uncle) by Jean-Price Mars and the writings of Jacques Roumain spark the politically important Noiriste movement to reclaim Haiti's African heritage.

1937

Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo orders the massacre of 20,000 Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic. After an outcry, compensation is later paid to the Haitian state at US\$29 per victim.

1957

François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier becomes president, and begins his project to turn Haiti into a totalitarian dictatorship, using a blend of terror, patronage, Vodou and economic cronyism.

A PRAYER FOR PAPA DOC

Papa Doc was never shy of promoting himself as Haiti's spiritual leader as well as its secular one. He managed to convince the Pope to allow him to appoint the Archbishop of Port-au-Prince, while simultaneously painting himself as the image of Baron Samedi to followers of Vodou. He even had the *Lord's Prayer* rewritten in his honor, dubbing it the *Catechism of the Revolution*:

'Our Doc, who art in the National Palace for life, hallowed be Thy name by present and future generations. Thy will be done in Port-au-Prince as it is in the provinces. Give us this day our new Haiti and forgive not the trespasses of those antipatriots who daily spit upon our country. Lead them into temptation, and poisoned by their own venom, deliver them from no evil. Amen.'

sure of his powerbase, and any hint of sticking to his father's Noiriste rhetoric was forgotten with his marriage to a wealthy mulatto, realigning himself with the traditional elite. Michele Duvalier was a conspicuous consumer who thought nothing of dropping a million dollars on a shopping trip to Paris – all paid for by the Haitian people, of course. Jean-Claude (who was inevitably dubbed Baby Doc) made some token concessions to human rights long enough to attract American factories back to Haiti, but followed up with periodic bouts of brutal repression.

In the mid-1980s protests began to erupt against the regime. The inept handling of a swine-fever outbreak that led to the eradication of the Creole pig that peasants depended on was only one spark to the fire. Despite being fired on by the army, mass protests toppled Baby Doc from power, who fled to a life of gilded exile in Paris.

ARISTIDE'S RISE & FALL

During the mid-1980s, a young priest named Jean-Bertrand Aristide, influenced by Latin American liberation theology, had begun preaching incendiary sermons, advocating a rebalancing of power away from the traditional elites toward the poor. Despite the optimism following Baby Doc's ouster, it soon became clear that even without the Tontons Macoutes it was business as normal. General Namphy seized power at the head of a military junta – Duvalierism without Duvalier.

Aristide's burgeoning Ti Legliz (Little Church) movement stepped up its campaign for reform, despite repression and cosmetic elections in 1987. These saw voter massacres and the generals entrenched even further, lining their pockets in the cocaine-smuggling business. Namphy was replaced by General Prosper Avril, who was persuaded to hold elections in the face of increasing unrest across Haiti. Aristide stood as a surprise last-minute candidate with the slogan 'Lavalas' (Flood) and won a landslide victory. His outspoken criticism of the junta had won him a huge following among the poor, who came out in force to support him.

Aristide took power with an audacious program. At his inauguration he publicly retired most of the army's remaining generals, and proposed separating the army and the police to depoliticize them. But just seven months into his term, an alliance of rich mulatto families and army generals, worried about their respective business and drug interests, staged a bloody coup. General Raoul Cédras, the one general Aristide trusted, seized the reins of power.

International condemnation was swift, but it wasn't until floods of Haitian boat people started arriving in the USA a year later that efforts to resolve the situation stepped up. More than 40,000 refugees fled the widespread violence and repression in Haiti, only to be intercepted by the US Coast Guard and repatriated via the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba – an act widely criticized internationally.

Newly elected Bill Clinton helped bring about an oil embargo against the regime, although the US government turned a blind eye to American companies breaking it. A plan was eventually brokered to allow Aristide to return in 1993, but when a US navy vessel arrived in Port-au-Prince to support a transition, it was prevented from docking by gangs of thugs from the right-wing FRAPH (Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti) militia who had been menacing and killing Lavalas supporters.

Sanctions were promptly tightened, and black American political groups kept up the pressure for a resolution to the crisis. Although American support for Aristide was crucial, it wasn't unconditional. Many had seen the priest as a radical socialist, so when a plan was finally brokered for his return the next year, it was only on his agreement to sign up to a World Bank and International Monetary Fund economic restructuring plan that eviscerated his original ideas for Haitian reform. Aristide signed, after three years of exile, and was returned cheering, backed by a UN mandate and 20,000 US army troops.

COUPS & INTERVENTIONS, REDUX

Aristide's return wasn't all roses. Cédras was allowed to slip quietly into exile in Panama, and many of the FRAPH leaders (who had CIA contacts) were given refuge by the USA. Back in office, Aristide choked on implementing the imposed economic reforms and the promised foreign aid vanished as a result. Constitutional rules bar two successive presidential terms, so in 1995 Lavalas party prime minister René Préval was returned as president.

In opposition, Aristide was free to criticize, and Lavalas fell apart. The privatization of state utilities and lowering of tariffs to allow cheap imports laid off workers and devastated national food production. Aristide's new party, Fanmi Lavalas, split parliament and left the government without a prime minister for almost two years. In the end Préval was forced to call elections. The poll was marked by unrest, violence and allegations of vote rigging, but in 2001 Aristide returned to the presidential palace.

The Uses of Haiti by Paul Farmer is an angry and impassioned take on Haiti's often tortured relationship with the USA, leading up to the coup against Aristide in 1991.

1977

François Duvalier dies. His son Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier is inaugurated as president for life at the age of 19, with the national treasury as his personal piggy bank.

1982

In response to the presence of African Swine Fever, the USA pressures Haiti into eradicating its entire population of Creole pigs, the economic mainstay of the Haitian peasantry. The pig-replacement program is a complete failure.

1986

Popular protests force Jean-Claude Duvalier to flee Haiti into exile in France. A turbulent period of *dechoukaj* (uprooting) follows, to remove the influence of Duvalierism from the Haitian body politic.

1990

Radical priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide wins a landslide presidential election with support from his grassroots Lavalas movement, promising economic reform for the poor and plans to strip the Haitian army of its political powers.

1991

A military coup overthrows Aristide, followed by violent repression against the population. An international embargo is declared against the junta, while thousands of Haitians attempt to flee in boats to the USA.

1994

Backed by US Marines, Aristide returns to office. He abolishes the army and serves out the remainder of his term, though his social reforms are hobbled by the economic deals he struck to win international support for his return.

Michael Deibert's *Notes from the Last Testament* is a gripping eye-witness account of the chaos of the final years of Aristide's rule, up to the 2004 coup.

Aristide's second term was hardly a success. The opposition, which had boycotted the elections, refused to accept the result and the country again looked chaos in the face. The police were ineffectual against violence from both sides: opposition agitators, and the *chimeres*, armed gangs loyal to Aristide. Haiti's bicentennial in 2004 was marked by bloodshed.

The end came just a month later, when rebels captured Gonaïves and Cap-Haïtien. For the second time, Aristide's presidency ended in exile, as he fled to the Central African Republic and finally South Africa. Claims to his flight vary – Aristide himself maintains he was effectively kidnapped by US agents and bundled out of Port-au-Prince; the US denies this but maintains that his overthrow was necessary to return stability to Haiti. Either way, the US favorite Gerard Latortue took power and formed an interim administration, with peacekeepers from the UN Stabilization Mission for Haiti (MINUSTAH) sent to the island.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The instability of the coup period continued throughout Latortue's government. Repression against Lavalas supporters was matched by the violence of the *chimeres*. Port-au-Prince, in particular, was hit by a rash of gang violence and kidnappings. It wasn't until René Prével returned to office in 2006 that things started to calm down. MINUSTAH launched a controversial but largely successful military campaign to uproot the gangs, and finally brought a modicum of normality to the streets of the capital.

The path ahead remains tricky – evident in early 2008, when demonstrations against rocketing food prices turned briefly violent. Repeatedly battered from the time that St-Domingue's slaves threw off their shackles, Haiti has entered its third century as an independent nation mixing guarded optimism with a tired hope for lasting stability.

MINUSTAH has its own website (www.minustah.org, in French) covering all aspects of the UN's involvement in Haiti.

2001

Aristide wins a second term as president, against a backdrop of increasing instability and an opposition boycott of the election. Chaos paralyzes Haiti, making effective government impossible.

2004

Armed rebels force Aristide from office, in disputed circumstances. Violence continues under the interim government, exacerbated by the havoc wreaked by Hurricane Jeanne later in the year.

2006

René Prével re-elected as president. In response to gang warfare and kidnappings, UN-mandated troops lead the campaign against Port-au-Prince gangs, improving security but resulting in civilian deaths.

Haiti Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

For many Haitians, their national identity is something they are both proud of and vilified for. Haiti's history as the first independent black republic is something to be continuously celebrated, yet Haitians are keenly aware that this is not how most of the world sees them. Instead, images of boat people, misunderstandings about Vodou and a history of US interventions cloud popular perceptions, and inevitably some of this is reflected back on the Haitian self-image. Most visitors are likely to receive a warm welcome and a strong dose of national pride (particularly if you can manage a few words of Creole), as Haitians are keen to counter their media stereotypes.

Life in Haiti is communal and based on extended families. In the country this takes the form of the *lakou*, a grouping of half a dozen or so houses in a shared compound, allowing labor and materials to be pooled. Although urban drift challenges this model, community spirit is remarkably strong in the shanties of Port-au-Prince, where unemployment is rife and residents have to support each other to survive. Religion plays a correspondingly strong role in binding Haitians together, whether through Vodou or the traditional church.

LIFESTYLE

Life in Haiti has always been sharply divided between the tiny urban elite and the poor rural bulk of the population.

Most Haitians are peasants practicing subsistence farming. Beans, sweet potatoes, maize, bananas or coffee are grown on small plots, while along the coast fishermen take their catch from simple sailboats. Division of labor is clear – men plant and harvest the crops and women care for the children and prepare meals. In rural areas, women usually sell the crops and are more economically active (see p276).

Rural life is hard. Electricity is often a distant aspiration and food is cooked over charcoal, the production of which is a major cause of environmental damage. Food insecurity is high, and usually only two meals a day are eaten. Community spirit isn't wanted for, however, and large-scale jobs are tackled by communal work teams called *kombits*, with neighbors pooling labor and sweating and singing together. In the evenings, groups often relax by playing *Krik? Krak!*, an oral game of riddles, or men gather by oil lamp to drink rum and play dominoes.

According to city dwellers, the rural poor live in the *peyi andeyò* (outside country), totally removed from the economic and political levers of power. Peasants are either mocked as yokels or mythologized in folkloric art and dances as the noble poor. But as demands on the exhausted land have reached breaking point, increasing numbers of peasants have sought a better life in Port-au-Prince. The result are the teeming *bidonvilles* (slums) of areas like Cité Soleil, shanties of cinder-block houses reinforced with abandoned metal sheeting and cardboard packing cases. Drinking water has to be brought in on tankers, and open ditches serve for sewers. During heavy rains, the *bidonvilles* regularly flood and raw sewage rages through the shacks.

For the elite 1% of the population who own half the country's wealth, life could hardly be more different. The mainly mulatto family oligarchies disdain Creole in favour of speaking French, dominate manufacturing and import/export, and have traditionally been the powers that stood behind the president's throne. Behind the high walls of Pétionville are the best French

Libetè: 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.

French has always been Haiti's literary language. The first novel published in Creole was *Dézafi* by Franck Etienne, published in 1975.

The online Haitian Book Centre (www.haitianbookcentre.com) is a fantastic resource for tracking down hard-to-find books about Haiti.

restaurants and boutiques, the most imposing SUVs and riches unimaginable by the vast majority of Haitians.

ECONOMY

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere and its economy lags far behind those of its nearest neighbors, including the Dominican Republic. Haiti is a major recipient of international aid.

In the 1980s Haiti became a major center for assembly factories, producing sporting goods, clothing and electronic components for the US market. Despite the work being generally very low paid, these factories were important job creators, many of which pulled out during the turmoil of the 1990s. To revive the industry, Haiti has been granted tariff-free clothing exports to the USA, but is hampered by poor infrastructure. Removal of tariffs in the opposite direction has damaged local economies further – rice farming has been devastated by cheap imported American rice.

The majority of urban Haitians are underemployed and scraping by on minimal incomes. Even the *boureyte*, the cart pullers in every city working as beasts of burden, have to rent their handcarts, while the lack of access to capital means that the *marchands* (female market sellers) find it hard to expand their businesses.

Women are often more economically active in the countryside, responsible for selling farm goods at the markets. Rural *revendeuses* (saleswomen) travel great distances between markets, buying and selling staples. The peasant economy largely exists outside the formal economy.

The huge number of Haitians living outside Haiti are important contributors to the economy, with remittances to families helping more directly than much international aid. Foreign money plays a less positive role in other spheres though, with Haiti remaining a major transshipment center for drug trafficking from South America to the USA, with narco dollars corrupting state machinery.

POPULATION

Haiti is home to almost 8.4 million people, of whom three-quarters are rural, living off agriculture. People of African origin make up about 95% of Haiti's population. The other 5% is made up of mulattos, Middle Easterners and people of other races. It is believed that some of the population are descendants of the union between the Arawak and Taíno peoples, the original indigenous population, and African slaves. Members of the mulatto class, which constitutes half of the country's elite and controls most of the country's economy, are the descendants of African slaves and French plantation owners.

In the small town of Cazales, north of Cabaret, one can find the anomaly of dark-skinned, blue-eyed people who sing and dance to traditional Polish

Starring Charlotte Rampling, *Heading South* (2005) is a compelling drama about power relationships and sex tourism in Baby Doc's Haiti, based on the short stories of Haitian writer Dany Laferrière.

Remittances from the Haitian diaspora were worth an estimated US\$1.65 billion in 2006 – 35% of Haiti's GDP.

RESTAVEKS

It's a sad irony that in a country that won its freedom in a slave rebellion, child slavery is still endemic. A *restavek* is a bonded child domestic laborer, three-quarters of whom are girls. There are around 200,000 *restaveks* in Haiti. The children are given up by their destitute parents, who are unable to feed them, to urban families, where they live as domestic servants. Although some are well cared for, they are frequently barred from attending school and physically or sexually abused. Fetching water and cleaning during 18-hour days are common tasks, and to encourage hard work, small whips called *martinets*, often sold in the markets and specially designed to be used on children, are used. Many children run away and prefer life on the dangerous streets to living with their 'adoptive' parents.

LUCKY NUMBERS

See those brightly painted shacks called 'bank' on every street in Haiti? They're hardly safe places for your money – they're selling *borlette* (lottery) tickets. Everyone bets on the lottery. Tickets cost a couple of gourdes, with prizes of just a few dollars. Numbers are taken from the New York State lottery, with just three needed to scoop some cash. Everyone has their own system of picking a winner, and there's even a pocketbook called a *tchala* that allows players to interpret dreams and symbols as winning numbers.

folk music. These are descendants of a Polish regiment from Napoléon's army who were so sickened by the war against the slaves in Haiti that they deserted in 1802, establishing a small community in the countryside.

SPORTS

In most of the Caribbean, there's only one question: 'Cricket or baseball?' In Haiti you'll just meet a blank stare, because this country is all about soccer. You can see impromptu games everywhere, but the big matches are in the Digicel Première Division, which runs from November to May. The most successful sides are Racing Club Haïtien from Port-au-Prince, and Saint-Marc's Baltimore Sportif Club. Most clubs lack investment, but the talent is there – in 2008 English Premiership sides sent scouts to the country looking for promising youth players, a first in the Caribbean. The Sylvio Cator Stadium in Port-au-Prince is a great place to see a match, usually raucous affairs. Its biggest day out in years was in 2004 when world champions Brazil played here to promote the Brazilian leadership of the UN Stabilization Mission for Haiti (MINUSTAH) mission.

Cockfighting is popular across Haiti, and *gallera* (cockfighting rings) are hidden away in the back streets of most towns. Unlike in the DR, the birds neither wear spurs nor fight to the death. Before a fight, the two cocks are paraded in the pit, although there's usually more strutting done by the owners than the cocks. Everyone bets. If you favor one bird, you point it out to someone next to you. If they prefer the other, your neighbor will take your money, usually about a dollar, and keep hold of all the cash throughout the fight. If your bird wins, you've doubled your money. Expect a very macho atmosphere and a lot of shouting – it's best to attend with a local.

MULTICULTURALISM

One of the main threads of Haitian history since independence has been the cleaving of the blacks and the mulattoes into two largely separate social classes. The mulattoes have formed the business and military elites, holding power over the black majority. Mulatto society has tended to be European in outlook, keeping French as its mother tongue and distancing itself from its African roots. In contrast, the traditions of Vodou and the Creole language have allowed black Haitians to maintain their African heritage, although it wasn't until the Noirisme movement of the 1920s that this was given a formal voice.

Haiti's foreign ties have always been strongest with the USA, a country that has frequently involved itself directly in Haitian political life. The largest populations of Haitians outside Haiti are in the US, mainly in New York and Miami. Haitians often maintain contradictory views about the USA. On the one hand, it is seen as having a malign influence on Haitian life on everything from supporting coups to the Creole pig fiasco, while on the other hand it remains a major economic draw for many Haitians seeking a better life.

In 1974 Haiti became the first Caribbean country to qualify for the soccer World Cup. Although the team failed to win a single match, it did at least score a famous goal against the great Italian goalkeeper Dino Zoff. For soccer results, see www.haitifoot.com.

Haitians in the DR aren't always welcomed, often facing racism and discrimination. For more information, see p52.

HAITI & HIV

HIV is a contentious topic in Haiti. In the early 1980s a number of AIDS cases in south Florida were linked to Haitian immigrants. In the resulting furor, Haiti was accused in the international media of being the crucible for HIV/AIDS in North America. Although scientific evidence for this was swiftly retracted, the label stuck and had a devastating effect on the country's international image, and effectively wiped out the tourism industry overnight. In late 2007 genetic research repeated this claim, causing a similar uproar, although again the results of the research were disputed with many Haitians claiming this was another stick the media would use to beat them. Away from the controversy, Haiti's HIV infection rate has actually dropped in recent years due to safe-sex education and increased condom use.

MEDIA

Radio is the most important media in Haiti. Traditionally French-only, many stations now broadcast in Creole. Independent media continues to face a number of challenges. Many radio and print media outlets are owned by people operating in Haitian politics, and are not always welcoming of investigative journalism. The Association of Haitian Journalists, which bravely speaks up for independent reporting, regularly receives death threats against its members, and many journalists have either been killed or have had to flee Haiti for filing reports that offended vested interests.

Most Haitian websites are written in French. News sites in English are often highly partisan, with pro- and anti-Aristide websites shouting loudly for attention.

RELIGION

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 – for more information, see p279.

Catholicism dominates public life, and has frequently found itself swimming in the murky currents of Haitian politics. François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier (see p269) 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 numerous 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.

WOMEN IN HAITI

Women are often referred to as the central pillar, or *poteau mitan*, of Haitian life, but it's an honor not always borne out by reality. In a poor country, women are the poorest citizens. In some ways, women are often highly visible being economically active, such as the *marchands* on every street, and the traveling *revendeuses* who stitch the rural economies together. But lack of access to education prevents most women from stepping above these simple market activities. In the cities, the problem may be more acute, especially in the slum areas of Port-au-Prince, where

endemic unemployment, poverty and gangs have created a rape problem of massive proportions.

**ARTS
Painting & Sculpture**

The visual arts of Haiti – mainly paintings but also sculpture and Vodou flags – are an outpouring of creative force unmatched in the Caribbean.

Painting under early leaders like President Boyer followed the European portrait tradition, but parallel to this artists had always been active painting murals to decorate the walls of Vodou temples and making elaborate sequined flags for use in ceremonies. The link to the *lwa* (Vodou spirits) with their visual language of Vêvé signs is central to Haiti's artistic vision.

In the 1920s Port-au-Prince artists started the Indigéniste movement, the visual equivalent to literature's Noirisme (see p278), seeking to reclaim Haiti's African roots. Subject matter switched from literal representation to idealized subjects, such as peasant life and landscapes. This style of art is often dubbed 'naïve' or 'primitive,' partly due to its simple style and avoidance of classical perspective.

The Indigénistes paved the way for the arrival of the American De Witt Peters in Port-au-Prince. Trained in the arts, Peters recognized the extraordinary flavor of the primitivist work and helped artists to develop their skills by setting up the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince (p296). Here he discovered Hector Hyppolite, a Vodou priest now considered Haiti's greatest painter. A flood of stunning painters soon arrived at the Centre d'Art, all untutored but producing incredible work that stunned the international art world. As one critic noted, 'generous nature was their one and only instructor.' At the same time, Peters also discovered Georges Liautaud, the carved iron sculptor of Croix des Bouquets (p311).

Throughout the 1950s naïve art became standard, pressed into easily recognizable images to serve the booming tourist market (the same paintings are still offered today). The Foyer des Arts Plastiques movement, led by Lucien Price, reacted against this by injecting a social ethic into Indigénisme. This moved away from magic realism to portray the harsh realities of Haitian life. The next great theme arose with the Saint-Soleil group of the 1970s. Spontaneity was key for artists like Tige and Louisianne St Fleurant, often painting *lwa* as abstract forms or bursts of energy.

Modern Haitian art continues to go from strength to strength, from young painters, such as Pascal Monnin, to the inspired junkyard Vodou sculptures of the Grand Rue artists (p297).

MUSIC

Haitian music has been used for many things – as an accompaniment to Vodou ceremonies, as a form of resistance in politics, or even just to dance the night away.

One of the most popular forms of Haitian music is *rara*. During Carnival, Port-au-Prince and Jacmel fill with rivers of people who come to hear the *rara* bands traveling the streets on floats. Most bands compete for the song prize with a specially composed song, each of which has been recorded and played constantly on the radio during the lead-up to Carnival. In the country, *rara* bands march for miles, with percussionists and musicians playing *vaskins* and *kònets* (bamboo and zinc trumpets, respectively). They create an otherworldly sound, with each instrument playing just one note, but together creating mesmerizing riffs with the drummers.

Dance music has always taken in foreign sounds. Cuban *son* has influenced the troubadour bands that entertain in restaurants and hotels, singing and

Gérald Alexis's monumental *Haitian Painters* is a comprehensive and gorgeously illustrated book that should grace the coffee table of anyone with even a passing interest in the Haitian art scene.

The Centre d'Arts' biggest project was the murals of Port-au-Prince's Sainte Trinité Episcopal Cathedral (p295), an astonishing showcase of Haiti's naïve masters.

Ghosts of Cité Soleil (2006) by Asger Leth is a slick (if partisan) documentary about gangs in the aftermath of Aristide's 2004 ouster, viewed through a lens of bad-boy hip-hop imagery.

Directed by Jonathan Demme, *The Agronomist* (2003) is a powerful documentary about the life (and eventual murder) of Haitian journalist and activist Jean Dominique.

The word *teledjol* means 'word of mouth' – the traditional medium for carrying the news (in a country where rumor is often truth).

gently strumming guitars. Merengue, the Dominican big-band sound (see p55), has always been played enthusiastically on dance floors, and in the 1950s evolved into *compas direct* (or just *compas* for short), with its slightly more African beat. A joy to dance to, its greatest exponents are Nemours Jean-Baptiste and the late Coupé Cloué.

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. For many *racines* bands, this new music reflected the struggle for change in Haiti. The lyrics were a clarion call for change and for a reevaluation of the long-ignored peasant culture. *Racines* was propelled by Vodou rhythms overlaid with electric guitars, keyboards and singing. The most notable *racines* bands are Boukman Eksperyans, Boukan Ginen and RAM. During the military dictatorships of the late 1980s and the coup years of the 1990s, many of these bands endured extreme harassment and threats from the military. For more on RAM, see the boxed text (p304). In recent years musicians like Wyclef Jean have refreshed Haitian music once more, with American-influenced Creole hip-hop.

Song and dance are integral to any Vodou ceremony, with the *lwa* greeted and saluted by their own songs, and constant drumming marking out the pace of ritual. For more, see p281.

Literature

Haiti's literary scene is almost as rich as its visual arts. The American Occupation from 1915 to 1934 was its main creative spur, as black Haitians sought to create a strong independent cultural identity through literature. The resulting Noiriste movement had a big impact on Haitian politics (see p268). Important novels were *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (Thus Spoke the Uncle) by Jean-Price Mars, which sought to reclaim the voice of the Creole peasantry, and Jacques Roumain's *Les gouverneurs de la rosée* (Masters of the Dew), generally recognized to be Haiti's finest work of literature.

Writers like Roumain were influenced by the international Surrealist movement, which in the late 1940s was responding to the newly discovered Haitian naive painters. Stéphen Alexis and poet René Depestre thrived in response.

The rise of the ostensibly Noiriste 'Papa Doc' Duvalier saw intellectual and literary life come under attack. Alexis was murdered by Duvalier's henchmen and Depestre went into exile. Probably the most famous book on Haiti, *The Comedians*, by Graham Greene, was a horrifically comic response to Papa Doc's vicious rule.

Many of the best contemporary Haitian writers have come from the diaspora. Most celebrated is Edwidge Danticat, writer of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, *The Farming of Bones* and *Krik? Krak!*, all written in English. Dany Laferrière (*An Aroma of Coffee*) is another noted Haitian novelist.

Architecture

Very few examples of French colonial architecture have survived Haiti's tempestuous history. The best are found in the north, such as at Fort Liberté (p339). Many forts were also built in the immediate years following independence, the most stupendous of which is easily the Citadelle (p338), along with the palace of Sans Souci (p337), both built during the reign of Henri Christophe.

In the late 19th century, Parisian style met the requirements of tropical living in the so-called gingerbread houses and mansions, characterized by their graceful balconies, detailed wooden latticework and neo-Gothic designs. For a walk through Port-au-Prince's gingerbread architecture, see p297 Fine examples can also be found in Cap-Haïtien and Jacmel.

Unsurprisingly, 'Papa Doc' Duvalier hated Graham Greene's satirical novel *The Comedians*, banning it and raging against the author who he dubbed 'a conceited scribbler' and 'a chimerical radicalist.'

Gingerbread Houses: Haiti's Endangered Species by Anghelen Arrington Phillips contains dozens of beautiful line drawings of the best gingerbreads in Port-au-Prince, Cap-Haïtien, Jacmel and Jérémie.

Haiti Vodou

It's hard to think of a more consistently maligned and misunderstood religion than Vodou. The name itself sparks an instantly negative word-association game of voodoo dolls, zombies and black magic – less a religious tradition than a mass of superstitions based on ignorance and fear. The truth is somewhat distant from the hype. Vodou is a complicated and sophisticated belief system with roots in Haiti's African past and the slave rebellion that brought the country's independence in 1804. Central to Haiti's national identity, these roots have also led to the demonization of Vodou in the West.

For three centuries slaves were shipped to Haiti from the Dahomey and Kongo kingdoms in west and central Africa. The slaves brought their traditional religions with them as well as their labor; beliefs in the spirit world helped sustain them through their bondage. Vodou as practiced today is a synthesis of these religions, mixed with residual rituals from the Taínos along with Catholic and Masonic regalia, and symbols inherited from the colonial plantation era.

This rich mix of traditions is what makes Haitian Vodou unique. Conversion of slaves to Christianity was an active policy in the colony, as the salvation of one's 'heathen soul' was seen as ample reward for being worked to death on a plantation. Many slaves, however, had other ideas, and saw in the icons of Catholic saints their own African spirits, represented in new forms and as new ideas, and appropriated the images as their own. Vodou thrived both clandestinely on the plantations and among bands of runaway slaves in secret hill camps. Forming a wholly new religion, it bound together the slaves from disparate parts of Africa, now incorporated into the Vodou pantheon as the spirits of the 21 Nations of Africa.

Vodou played a large part in both the inspiration and organization of the struggle for independence. The Vodou ceremony at Bois Cayman in 1791, presided over by the slave and priest Boukman, is considered central to sparking the first fires of the Haitian slave rebellion that led to eventual independence. However, Vodou's relationship to power has always been a rocky one. Both Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines outlawed Vodou during their reigns, fearing its political potential. Ironically, the killing and expulsion of whites under Dessalines removed the influence of the Catholic priesthood and allowed Vodou to develop without external influences. Overseas, the 'bad example' of slaves emancipating themselves led to Vodou being castigated in the USA and Europe throughout the 19th century. The bad press went into overdrive during the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Coinciding with the advent of Hollywood and the dime-store pulp novel, the Western public eagerly ate up concocted stories of darkest Africa in the Caribbean, all witch doctors and child sacrifice.

Haitian governments have played their part, too, with several ruthless anti-superstition campaigns in the 20th century egged on by the Catholic Church

First published in 1953, Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* is a classic work. If you only read one book on Vodou, make it this one.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Vodou is the officially recognized name of Haiti's religion. The word is from the Fon word *vodu* (divine spirit), from modern-day Benin. As the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, Benin provided many of the slaves transported to Haiti, and Vodun remains the national religion of the country. Modern practitioners tend to avoid the Anglicized 'voodoo', because of its lurid associations in popular culture.

and the government. In the 1930s and early '40s Vodou altars were burned and Mapou trees (sacred trees where spiritual offerings are made) were cut down. 'Papa Doc' Duvalier chose to co-opt the Vodou priests instead, which led to a violent backlash against some practitioners after the fall from power of his son in 1986. By this time, however, more-progressive Catholics in the Haitian church had begun to reach an accommodation with Vodou, and in 1987 a new constitution guaranteed freedom of religion. In 1991 President Aristide formally ranked Vodou as a national religion alongside Christianity.

PRACTICE & CEREMONIES

Vodou is not an animist religion of worshipping spirits. Followers of Vodou (Vodouisants) believe in one God, Gran Met (Great Master), whom they worship. Gran Met is seen as being distant from the physical plane, so lesser spirit entities called *lwa* are approached in ceremonies as interlocutors. Summoned through prayer, song, drumming and dance, the *lwa* are the spirits left to help followers in their journey back to the divine. During ceremonies, the *lwa* possess or 'mount' participants. Being possessed is central to a ceremony and is the ultimate purpose for initiates as they experience absolute communication with the God and their ancestors. Possession is analogous to the speaking in tongues in Christian spiritualism, or the rapture of Muslim Sufism. *Lwa* possession manifests itself in song, dance, the offering of advice or healing illnesses.

There are many branches (or houses) of *lwa*, which are called upon in different orders according to ritual. The most popular invoked *lwa* are the Rada, also known as the 'sweet' or 'cool' spirits. Rada summoning accounts for more than 90% of Vodou ceremonies. In contrast, the 'hot' or 'angry' Petro *lwa* are rarely invoked, due to their links with black magic. Those that summon the Petro are said to practice their religion with the left hand. Other families of *lwa* include the Gédé, spirits associated with death and the transition to the next world, and the *lwa* of the African nations, such as the Ibo, Senegal and Kongo.

Ceremonies are generally held in dedicated temples, called peristyles. Each peristyle contains an altar, decorated with paintings of *lwa* and images of Catholic saints alongside rocks, bottles of liquor and packets of herbs. At the center of the peristyle is a *poto mitan*, a pole representing a tree that provides a focus for ceremonies. Peristyles are dedicated to a particular house of *lwa*, and decorated accordingly, with paintings on doors and walls and the hanging of bunting. Each peristyle is maintained by a priest – either a *houngan* or *mambo* depending on whether they are male or female. Each carries an *asson* (ceremonial rattle) as a symbol of their priesthood.

Initiation

There are different levels of participation in Vodou ceremonies and religions. An uninitiated adherent, known as a Vodouisant (a general term such as Christian or Muslim), can attend ceremonies, seek advice and medical treatment from a *houngan* or *mambo*, and take part in Vodou-related activities.

For a Vodouisant to become a *houngan* or *mambo*, he or she must first go through a series of initiations. Those preparing for the first level of initiation are sometimes called *hounsi bossale*. All wear white clothing in ceremonies to show humility. Forming a choir, the *hounsis* can be possessed by *lwa*. After their first mounting, initiates are regarded as *serviteurs* or *hounsi kanzo*, marked by a ritual washing of the head (*lave tet*).

Those willing or able to progress take the *asson* at a *si pwen* ritual. Held in secret, the *serviteur* becomes a *houngan* or *mambo*. These practitioners lead prayers and songs, conduct rituals and are those most likely to be possessed by *lwa*. They often act as choirmasters in ceremonies, and may become leaders of their own temples. The final level of initiation is Asogwe.

ARE ZOMBIES REAL?

The dead that walk are a key part of popular media voodoo imagery, but do they have any basis in Vodou fact?

Many Haitians believe in the existence of the *zombi* (the Creole spelling): a person brought back from the grave to do the bidding of another. The practice is the alleged providence of a *bokor* (sorcerer), who serves the *lwa* 'with both hands.' A potion is secretly given to a victim, which induces a deathlike state to such an extent that they are actually given a funeral. The *bokor* then exhumes and revives the person, and induces a trance, under which the victim can be controlled, most usually to do manual labor.

Fact or horror story? Researchers have claimed that the poison tetrodotoxin is the key ingredient in the potion, as it can induce such states. Vodouisants claim the potion causes the victim to lose its *ti-bonanj* (a person's 'good angel', similar to the conscience), turning them into a shell. Salt apparently can revive a *zombi*. Modern reports of *zombis* are incredibly uncommon and are rarely verified. Zombification remains a criminal offence under Haitian law.

These are the ultimate human authority, with the power to initiate others, and are called upon when others are unable to summon a particular *lwa*.

Beating the Drums

Vodou services are highly developed rituals to pleasure, feed and ultimately summon the *lwa* through the possession of a human body. Ceremonies are called to order through singing and drums, struck in tattoos of 13 beats. These symbolize knocking on the door of Ginen (ancestral Africa), with the entire congregation matching the beat with handclaps. After this, the Asogwe sing the Priye Ginen (prayer of Africa). It begins with Catholic hymns in French before segueing into Creole prayers, lists of ancestors and *lwa*, and finishing in *langaj*, the forgotten tongues of the 21 African nations.

All ceremonies begin this way, but what comes next depends on the *lwa* being summoned. For Rada services, there are usually three drums: the *mamman*, the *segon* and the *boula*. The *mamman* is the largest drum, which the leading drummer beats fiercely with a single stick and one hand. The *segon* player provides hypnotic counter-rhythms, while the *boula* drummer plays an even rhythm that holds all the others together. The *houngan* or *mambo* then takes the *asson* from the altar and the *hounsis* start to dance and sing ritual songs. The spirits appear in strict order and are summoned by their own particular drum rhythms and songs.

Before any *lwa* can be summoned, Legba (the spirit of the crossroads; see boxed text, p282) must open the gates to the spirit world. Then the four cardinal points are saluted, acknowledging the rising and setting sun, and birth and death.

At the top of the spirit listing, the ceremony honors Papa Loko Attisou (the ancestral spirit of Vodou's original priest), who is greeted through song. The *houngan* then traces out the *vévé* (sacred symbol) for Ayizan (the first Vodou priestess) in cornmeal or flour on the floor. Thought to be the legacy of the Tainos, the ephemeral and delicate *vévés* are pounded into the earth by dancers' feet. These spirits preside over the ceremony as a whole rather than manifesting through mounting.

Next Damballah may be greeted – a participant possessed by Damballah will writhe around the floor in a serpentine manner. The congregation then continues to salute a host of spirits with individual rhythms and songs.

The first group of *lwa* is the Rada, and their main ceremonial color is white. This is the most disciplined and restrained part of the ceremony as participants seeking particular services make their requests.

Followers of Vodou don't talk of practicing Vodou, instead referring to it as 'serving the *lwa*.'

In *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, ethnobotanist Wade Davis searches for the truth behind Haiti's *zombi* phenomenon. A gripping mix of science and travelogue, although the author isn't afraid of painting himself as the next Indiana Jones.

THE VODOU PANTHEON

There are a dizzying number of *lwa*, each with well-defined characteristics, including sacred numbers, colors, days, ceremonial foods and ritual objects. These are some of the most important *lwa*:

Legba

The master of passageways, who guards entrances and crossroads and the doors between the physical and spirit worlds. Often portrayed as a crippled wanderer, he can offer directions or equally misdirect you. His counterparts include St Peter and St Lazarus, and offerings include green bananas, bones, toys and cigars.

Damballah

Depicted as a snake biting its tail, the master of the sky and *grande zombi* represents the ordering of chaos and the creation of the world, as well as the dualities of death/rebirth, sickness/health and male/female. His counterpart is St Peter, and he is offered white chickens, eggs, rice and milk.

Marasa

These *lwa* twins represent love, truth and justice. Often paid respect at the opening of ceremonies, they are associated with procreation and children, who are usually invited to feast on their offerings. Their counterparts are St Comas and St Daman; their offerings are piles of food.

Baron

Also known as Baron Samedi, this *lwa* is the master of the dead and keeper of the cemeteries. His powers are equally responsible for procreation of the living and putrefaction of the dead. Often depicted as a swaggering skeleton with top hat, cane and purple cape, his offerings include black roosters, rum, cigars and black coffee. St Gerard is his counterpart.

Maman Brigitte

The wife of Baron, Maman Brigitte has similar curative powers and is a foul-mouthed *lwa* with sexually suggestive dances. She's known to press hot peppers on her genitals, the test to which

The ceremony transitions through the *Doubla lwa*, the Ibo, Senegal and Kongo before arriving at the *Petro lwa*. Their ceremonial color of red reflects their fierce, magical and aggressive characters, and creates a fast-paced and exciting atmosphere.

The last family to appear is the *Gédé*, which includes Baron and Maman Brigitte, the keepers of the dead. With instantly distinguishable colors of violet and black, they appear in any order they like and their degenerate and bawdy behavior instantly changes the mood of any ceremony.

When the last repetitions of the final song are finished, the ceremony is over. Sometimes, however, enthusiastic participants may continue singing and dancing along to songs that relate to the *lwa*. This is the party that follows the service, called a *bamboche* in some parts of the country. The party can last until the wee hours of the dawn.

Attending a Ceremony

There are various levels of participation in a Vodou ceremony. Anyone may enter the peristyle and join a ceremony, and singing and dancing are encouraged. Most Vodou practitioners also welcome tourists to attend ceremonies in the hope that they will take a more positive view of the practice back to their home country, although it's essential to check instead of turning up unannounced.

It's advisable to arrive with a guide anyway – most ceremonies take place without fanfare in locations that would be hard to stumble upon randomly.

Voodoo in Haiti, by anthropologist Alfred Metraux, is another key work for understanding the centrality of Vodou in the national culture.

women suspected of 'faking' possession are subjected. Her counterpart is St Brigitte, and her offerings the same as Baron.

Erzuli Dantor

Comparable to Venus, and with the Virgin Mary as her counterpart, Erzuli Dantor is the *lwa* of love. She's also represented as La Sirene, a mermaid who enchants with her beauty and her trumpet. Perfume, wine, cakes and jewelry are all preferred offerings.

Erzuli Freda

The heart and the knife are the symbols of Erzuli Freda, the *lwa* of motherhood. A strongly passionate figure, she is represented everywhere by the image of the Black Madonna. She is voiceless, and carries facial scars from her African homeland. Her offerings include Creole pigs and rum.

Ogou

This warrior spirit of steel and iron was invoked by slaves fighting for freedom, and his strength means people call on him for support in physical and legal struggles. He takes offerings of all things red, especially roosters. His counterparts are St James and St Jacques.

Zaka

Zaka the farmer is the *lwa* of agriculture and harvest, usually depicted as a hard-working peasant in denim and red scarf, with a *macoute* (straw bag) – a look appropriated by Duvalier's Tontons Macoutes militia. His counterpart is St Isodor, and he is offered bread, sugar, tobacco and *klerin rum*.

Agwe

Agwe is the master of the sea. He not only provides passage across water but assists people as they emerge from water at birth and are reimmersed at death. He is offered rams, cakes and rum, and his counterpart is St Ulrich.

You should treat the *houngan* or *mambo* with respect by offering a gift, traditionally a bottle of five-star Barbancourt rum or a few good cigars. When you're introduced to the *houngan* or *mambo*, make sure you show appropriate reverence and, should you want to take photos or join in with the dancing, obtain permission beforehand. You may also be asked for a cash donation – to make an offering to the *lwa*, to pay the drummers and the *houngan* or *mambo*, and to contribute to the upkeep of the peristyle.

Certain elements of ceremonies are extremely secret and take place behind closed doors. Once they have advanced to the open they can still remain very intimate affairs. While tourists are usually warmly welcomed, in many cases it may be best to sit on the sidelines. It's definitely worth being aware that most services also involve animal sacrifice of some kind. The killing of an animal releases life, which the *lwa* receive to rejuvenate themselves during the rapture of the ceremony. Chickens are the most common offering.

Ceremonies are commonly held at night, starting any time from sunset on and often lasting all the way through to dawn. You might want to pace yourself, although it's acceptable to wander in and out of the sidelines. If you're staying late, try to arrange transport home before attending, as taxis start drying up late at night.

Baron Samedi is the last resort against magic, because even if a spell should bring a person to the point of death, he can refuse to 'dig the grave', meaning the person cannot die.

Haiti Food & Drink

Haitians love to eat. Everywhere you go in Haiti you can see food being prepared and eaten, from quick snacks cooked on the street and heaped plates of rice and beans being carried onto buses by hungry passengers, to liveried waiters serving high cuisine in the capital's swankiest restaurants. Haitian – that is to say Creole – cuisine is fairly simple, with a heavy reliance on starches, such as rice and plantains, and a selection of hearty sauces, complemented by the local catch from the Caribbean and a great array of refreshing tropical fruit.

STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

Main Dishes

If you walked into a restaurant anywhere in the country and asked for the most typical Creole dish, it's likely that the waiter would bring you a *plat complet*. In a single serving it gives a tour of the key elements of Haitian cuisine. The first element is *diri ak pwa* (rice and red beans), the staple that seems to power half the country. Next up is *bannann peze* (fried plantain), cut into thick slices. These starchy elements are balanced by your choice of meat – or just as often, whatever is available. Commonly this is *poule* (chicken), *griyo* (fried pork), *kabrit* (goat) or *tasso* (jerked beef). Also very popular is *lambi*, the conch harvested in huge numbers across Haiti and the Dominican Republic (see the boxed text, p38).

The meal is accompanied by a sauce, often served in a separate dish. This is usually the simple *sòs kreyol*, a tomato-based Creole sauce, but may also be the much livelier *ti malice* sauce, made with a liberal dose of chilies. A thin sauce is *bouillon*, more like a soup. Haitian food is generally more peppery than the Creole food found elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Haiti's long coastline means that seafood is widely available, and is very reasonably priced. The fish, garlicky *crevettes* (shrimp) and lobster can all be fantastic.

More often cooked at home than served in restaurants, *diri djon djon* is a Haitian twist on risotto. Dried *djon djon*, black mushrooms, are left to soak, and the soaking water is then used as a stock to cook rice, imparting a delicate smoky flavor to the meal. Another home-cooking favorite you can sometimes find is *mayi moulen* (cornmeal porridge), often cooked with kidney beans and flavored with peppers and coconut – a lifesaver for vegetarians when served with half an avocado. It's a staple dish for peasants, who often cannot afford anything grander. Yams and manioc (cassava) are another countryside staple. Every November village harvest festivals celebrate the new yam crop across the country.

Haiti's geography gives it enough microclimates to grow a staggering array of fresh produce, including both tropical and temperate varieties. Fruit is widespread, from citrus, coconuts and papaya to guava. King of all Haitian fruits, however, is the mango. Over 140 varieties are recorded but the most important is the Madame Francis, which is a major export crop for the country.

Snacks

You won't have to look far to find cheap and good street food. It can seem like there are women cooking and selling food on most street corners, with the concentration increasing the closer you get to a market or a bus station. When food is cooked like this at street level on charcoal braziers it's known

Chronic malnourishment is widespread in Haiti. It's estimated that around 2.4 million people (a quarter of the population) can't afford to consume the minimum 2240 daily calories recommended by the World Health Organization.

Soup jomou is a traditional pumpkin soup, and Haitian country cooking at its best. The proper time to eat it is on New Year's Day, when the entire country appears to tuck into a bowl.

Most hotels offer a free breakfast of bread, jam, eggs, juice and coffee, but you'll occasionally be offered heartier fare such as spaghetti, soup or boiled potatoes.

INDULGING YOUR SWEET TOOTH

One of the highlights of Haiti is *dous*, a term that covers a delightful range of sticky treats for anyone in need of a sugar rush. The ingredients vary, from coconut or peanut to molasses, made into cookies, fudge or brittle candy. Most areas of the country have their own special types of *dous*. One of the most famous is *dous macoss* from Petit Goâve, a milky sweet slab sold by so many shops you'd think it was the only thing for sale in the town. Alternatively, go for *pain patate*, a cake-bread made with milk, cinnamon, nutmeg and sweet potato.

as *chenjanbe* – 'crossed by dogs,' although the food is more appetizing than the name. The most common sight is a large pan of oil, used to produce *fritay*. More a technique than a particular menu item, anything can be fried up and offered in a roll of paper – wedges of plantain or breadfruit, knuckles of pork or, on the coast, a handful of tiny battered fish. *Accra* is a *fritay* made from grated *malanga*, a starchy root similar to yam. *Fritay* is often sold with a helping of *pikliz* (spicy pickled carrots and cabbage).

Bananas can also be thinly sliced and sold salted in bags like potato chips (*papite*) – ideal snacks on bus trips. Another filling snack is *pate* (*pate cho* when sold hot), savory pastries stuffed with beef, fish or chicken. Any of these snacks will cost just a few gourdes.

DRINKS

Haiti is blessed with an abundance of fruit, much of which is turned into delicious juice. Citrus varieties are the most commonly available, including freshly squeezed orange, lemon and *shadek*, a local cross between a grapefruit and a lemon. Servings come with a bowl of sugar to sweeten the taste. Grenadine, papaya and cherry also make popular juices. Fruit syrups are also slathered over crushed ice to make a *fresco* – great on a hot day, although the provenance of the ice can't always be guaranteed.

Coffee has consistently been an important export for Haiti, and good coffee is served everywhere. The best (and most expensive) variety is Haitian Blue.

Everyone who can afford it drinks treated water, and delivery trucks carrying plastic barrels of it are everywhere. Culligan is the longest-established brand, such that its name is synonymous with treated water in general. Other brands include Crystal and Aquafine. As well as being sold in smaller bottles, you'll see street vendors hawking sealed plastic bags of water for a few gourdes. Either way, the resulting plastic waste is a major contributor to Haiti's refuse mountain. Restaurants automatically provide jugs of treated water with meals; hotels similarly oblige. Never drink the tap water.

Most Caribbean countries proclaim that their rum is the best in the world, and Haiti is no exception. The main producer is Barbancourt, established in 1862. It's possible to visit the distillery just outside Port-au-Prince for a tour (see p312). Haitian rum is unique in that it is made direct from sugarcane, rather than the molasses left over during sugar production used elsewhere. Barbancourt ages its rum for up to 15 years in oak barrels. Both the three- and five-star rums are excellent, with the latter being a favored offering to Vodou priests. Most good hotel bars offer rum punches to their own recipe, and it's an essential travel experience to road test a few to discover the best. Rum sours (mixed with sugar and lime) are a refreshing alternative.

Haitians are also partial to *klerin*, a cheaper white rum produced in small distilleries for the local market. It can be ferocious stuff, but is renowned for it's health-giving properties (see the boxed text, p286).

To ask for Coca-Cola say 'Koka' not 'Coca-Cola', otherwise you'll receive the sweet fizzy Haitian drink called Kola.

Mirta Yurnet-Thomas's comprehensive *A Taste of Haiti* is the ideal cookbook to help you recreate your Haitian culinary adventure at home.

GOOD FOR WHAT AILS YOU

Although the strong kick of *klerin* (white rum) can sometimes be too much for visitors, for many Haitians, who well know the restorative powers of a good stiff drink, it's an essential part of their medicine cabinet. Look in the markets for small stalls carrying an interesting array of jars and bottles containing brightly colored liquids. This is the *klerin* pharmacy. With the skill of a herbalist, the vendor makes *treppe*, soaking carefully chosen leaves, bark, spices and fruits in *klerin* to produce remedies for almost any ill under the sun. Headaches, fits, stomach upsets and even problems in the bedroom can all be cured, it is claimed, by a well-made *treppe*.

The locally produced beer is Prestige, of which Haitians are deservedly proud. It was awarded a Médaille d'Or at the 2000 World Beer Cup. Presidente beer from the Dominican Republic is widely available, along with international brands like Heineken. The Prestige brewery also makes bottled Guinness under license, but it's more readily available in shops rather than bars.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's a gradation in eating establishments in Haiti. At the top there are restaurants, although you'll just as often eat in less formal bar-restaurants (or bar-restos), which span the divide between eating and drinking establishments. Breakfasts can be a big affair, and as most Haitians tend to eat their main meal of the day at lunchtime, it's not uncommon for places to open early but be closed by 9pm. Eating out in the evening can sometimes be a case of asking what's actually available in the kitchen rather than what's listed on the menu.

Most bar-restos offer only a handful of dishes, with variations on the pork/chicken with beans/rice/plantain theme. On the coast you can expect a wider choice, with plenty of seafood. Midrange restaurants usually carry menus mixing French and Creole dishes. Apart from pizza, pasta and burgers, international cuisine is virtually impossible to find outside the Port-au-Prince area. Haiti's best restaurants are all found in Pétionville.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Haiti isn't a terrifically kind country for vegetarians. Most dishes are meat-based to some degree, and pork fat is used widely to cook with, even in dishes that don't contain meat. If you ask to skip the meat, you'll just get the same dish with the meat fished out, often accompanied by a quizzical look. There are enough side dishes to keep you filled up, although the repetition of beans, rice and plantain may quickly have you on a carbohydrate overdose. Salads are common and avocados often accompany many dishes, but green vegetables are harder to find. Only the restaurants of Port-au-Prince and Pétionville really offer any decent selection of vegetarian food, although pizza and pasta are good meat-free standbys, and widely available. Be thankful for the surfeit of fresh fruit.

EAT YOUR WORDS

For pronunciation guidelines, see p369.

Useful Phrases

I'd like ...

I'd like what he/she is having.

I don't eat meat.

What do you have to drink?

Mwen ta vle ...

Mwen ta vle sa l-ap manje la.

Mwen pa janm manje viann nan.

Ki sa w gin pou bwe, souple.

**Very good/tasty.
The bill, please.**

Food Glossary

akra
bannann
bannann peze
bonbon dous
bonbon sèl
boutèy dlo
byè
diri
diri ak sòs pwa
diri djon djon
dlo
fig
fresco
fritay
griyo
gwayav
kabrit
kafe
kann
kasav
klerin
kokoye
lambi
mango
mayi moulen
oma
pain patate
papay
papita
pate
pen
piman
plat complet

poule
pwason
rom
seriz
shadek
sitwon
sòs kreyol
stèk
tasso
ti malis
zaboka
ze
zoranj

*Sa te bon anpil/li te tre bon mèsì.
Ou kap ban-m fich la, silvouple.*

fried malanga (yamlike tuber)
plantain
fried plantain slices
cookie
salty/savory biscuit
bottled water
beer
rice
rice cooked with beans
rice with dried mushrooms
water
banana
iced fruit syrup
fried snack food
pork
guava
goat
coffee
sugarcane
cassava
white rum
coconut
conch
mango
cornmeal porridge
lobster
cake-bread of milk, cinnamon, nutmeg and sweet potato
papaya
salted banana slices
hot savory pastry
bread
hot pepper
complete menu (consisting of rice and beans, salad, plantains and meat of your choice)
chicken
fish
rum
cherry
grapefruit
lemon/lime
tomato-based sauce
beef
beef dish with the meat cut into strips
hot pepper sauce
avocado
egg
orange

Except at the cheaper end, most restaurants add a 10% service charge to the bill, so further tipping is discretionary.

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