

# THE ISLAND OF DOMINICA:

*Nature, In Abundance*

A resident pod of sperm whales give whale watchers a wonderful view.



## dive geo

Story and photos by  
Ruth and Barry Guimbellot

Often called the nature isle, Dominica rests in the heart of the eastern Caribbean between the French islands of Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south. Born from volcanic activity, the island is rich in flora and fauna. Mountainous terrain, thickly carpeted with lush rain forest, dominates the island and beckons to the adventurous traveler who enjoys experiencing nature on its own terms.

Composed of eight potentially active volcanoes with some cones towering almost 5,000 feet (1,515 m), Dominica is the most mountainous island in the Lesser Antilles. Rich volcanic soil combined with heavy rainfall creates one of the most spectacular rain forests in the world. More than 1,000 flowering plants grow in abundance, and about 135 species of birds make the rain forests their home.



## FACTS AND FIGURES



**Location:** 15 degrees north latitude and 61 degrees west longitude, between Guadeloupe and Martinique in the far Eastern Caribbean.

**Size:** Landmass of 289.5 square miles (753 sq km); 29 miles by 16 miles (46 km by 26 km). The highest elevation is Morne Diablotin Piton at 4,747 feet (1,439 m).

**Time:** Greenwich Mean Time minus four hours; Eastern Standard Time plus one hour.

**Seasons:** The annual rainfall is more than 50 inches (127 cm) on the western coast and 350 inches (889 cm) in the mountainous regions. The dry season is January to June and wet season is from August to December.

**Money:** \$1 U.S. = \$2.67 East Caribbean (EC) dollar. Money exchanges are common in large airports and shopping centers, though the U.S. dollar is widely accepted. Larger stores accept credit cards.

**Electricity:** Dominica uses 240-volt, three-prong adapters like those used in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Many hotels will have adapters; a wise traveler will bring their own or have dual-voltage appliances.

**Measurements:** Speed limits are in kilometers. Dive operators generally use both feet/meters and psi/bars when communicating dive data.

**Entry requirements:** U.S. citizens will need a passport as well as a return or onward going ticket. No special visa is required of U.S. citizens staying fewer than 21 days.

**Population:** 70,000

**Transportation:** Taxis and buses are common and inexpensive. There is a 300-seat ferry and light plane service for travel to other islands. Driving is on the left with very winding and narrow roads in the highlands.

**Official language:** English with Creole, a mixture of French, African and Carib widely spoken.

**Health:** Dominica is not a malaria area and health facilities are common. In general, it is a country where health issues are not a major concern.

**Water:** The water is safe to drink out of the tap, but it is always a good practice to drink bottled water, especially in the smaller villages.

**Getting there:** There are two airfields: Canefield for interisland transfers and Melville Hall for larger flights. There are no international airports in Dominica so international flights from the United States and Europe connect through hubs in Puerto Rico, Antigua, Barbados, St. Maarten, Guadeloupe and Martinique.

**Dress:** Casual dress is the norm. Coverups are required when leaving the beach areas. Wear cool attire, as it is close to the equator and the weather can be hot, especially when in the rain forest.

**Tipping:** Many restaurants and hotels add a service charge in lieu of tipping.

**Departure tax:** A departure tax of \$55 EC (\$20.60 U.S.) is required per person.

**For more information:** Discover Dominica Authority, [www.discoverdominica.com](http://www.discoverdominica.com), e-mail: [tourism@dominica.dm](mailto:tourism@dominica.dm), U.S. toll-free: 1 (866) 522-4057.

Dominica boasts 365 waterfalls.

## Turbulent Beginnings

The Arawak people are the first known inhabitants indigenous to Dominica. They lived a relatively calm existence until the arrival of the Carib Indians, who proved to be fierce warriors and by the 14th century had either killed or expelled the Arawak from their homeland.

In November 1493, Christopher Columbus landed on the shores of Dominica and gave the island its name, but it was not until the 16th century that Spanish ships again visited the island. The Spaniards encountered strong resistance by the Carib Indians who discouraged the explorers from establishing settlements.

France became the first European nation to claim possession of Dominica in 1635. Again, heavy resistance by the Carib warriors forced France and, later, Britain, to abandon attempts to settle on the island. In 1686, France and Britain agreed to a treaty recognizing Dominica as a neutral territory, leaving it to the Caribs. Neither France nor Britain fully recognized or honored the treaty; by the 18th century, the two countries were embroiled in a continuous battle for possession of the island. Eventually the French established a settlement under the guidance of a French governor.

Dominica became a British possession when The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1763, ended the Seven Years War. During the wars of the mid-1700s, Britain and France exchanged possession of the island as many as 14 times, with Britain gaining permanent control of Dominica in 1805. Dominica formally took control of its internal affairs in 1967, but Britain retained responsibility for its defense. On November 3, 1978, Dominica gained independence from the United Kingdom and established itself as a democratic independent republic.

Most of the inhabitants of Dominica today are of African and, to a lesser extent, European and Indian descent. Dominica is the only eastern Caribbean island to retain its pre-Columbian population of Carib Indians, with more than 3,000 still living on the island. In 1903, more than 3,700 acres (1,480

## A MESSAGE FROM

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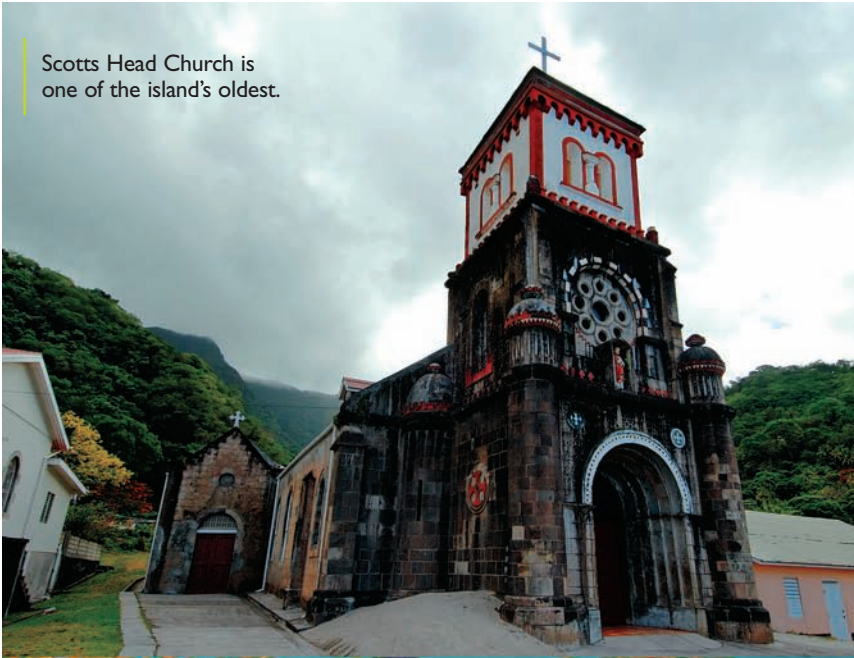
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Scotts Head Church is one of the island's oldest.



Dominican reefs are rich with flora and fauna.

hectares) were set aside on the eastern coast of the island to establish the Carib Indian Reservation for the descendants of the people who inhabited the island at the time of Columbus' arrival. To claim land, a person must have one parent of Carib origin and must reside on the reservation.

Numerous traditions have survived over time. Fishing, farming and the practice of several ancient skills such as hand-woven baskets continue today. Their straw crafts are different from any other woven in the Caribbean, easily distinguished by their design and fabrics. Artful woodcarving is also a legacy of the Caribs; in Castle Bruce, lucky visitors may see boatmen carving oceanworthy canoes from the trunks of hardy gommier trees.

The "Cultural Village by the Sea" is now open, offering visitors the opportunity to learn more about Carib traditions through live performances and demonstrations such as pottery making and weaving.

### A Visit to Roseau

On the southwestern coast is the capital city of Roseau (Rose-O). The British and French influence is evident throughout the city with some of the architecture dating back to the Victorian period. The Old Market, on the premises of one of the island's oldest structures, the Barracoon Building, is a haven for visitors. Tropical clothing, incense, pottery and much more are available for eager shoppers. Saturday mornings find the Roseau Market near the cruise ship pier filled with a rainbow of colors created by displays of many flowers, fruits and vegetables.

Explore the historic churches such as the Roseau Cathedral and St. George's Anglican Church near the site of Fort Young, a wooden fort built by the French in the 1700s to protect the newly developing colony. In 1761, the British renamed the fort after the first British governor, Sir William Young; the fort stood guard over the harbor and the town until 1854 when it was no longer necessary to have a military presence.



The Dominican coastline at the Caribe village.

Fort Young became a hotel in 1964. Hurricane David virtually destroyed the hotel in 1979, and renovation of the hotel did not begin until 1989. It still has some of the original structure of the fort incorporated into the architecture, including two impressive brass cannons that stand guard at the entrance to the hotel.

The cuisine in Roseau and throughout the island has a distinctive Creole flavor due to the mixed heritage of French, West African, British and Carib inhabitants. Popular dishes include mountain chicken (frog legs), crayfish and stuffed land crabs. Fruits and vegetables such as bananas, plantains and dasheen (a root vegetable) are locally grown.

### **Dominica's Bounty**

Dominica has six major reserves, including the 17,000-acre (7,650-hectare) Morne Trois Piton National Park, the only National World Heritage Site in the eastern Caribbean. In 1998, UNESCO recognized the park for this honor because of its majestic mountains, freshwater lakes, waterfalls and rare endemic flora and fauna. The park is a great escape for hikers of all levels. Near Roseau is an easy hiking trail to Trafalgar Falls where three waterfalls cascade over the cliffs of Morne Micotrin into pristine pools nestled among huge boulders and tropical vegetation. Another easy hike is to Emerald Pool just 30

minutes north of the village of Laudat. More advanced hikers can follow trails to Boeri Lake (2,000 feet [606 m]) and Freshwater Lake (2,779 feet [842 m]), the largest of Dominica's five lakes. The lakes were once one large body of water until the eruption of a more recent volcano, Morne Micotrin, split the water into separate lakes, creating one of the most awesome settings on the island.

For the most athletic hikers, there is a four-hour trek to Boiling Lake in the national park. Those who brave this arduous hike will marvel at the beauty of the tropical rain forest they see along the way.

Those who don't wish to hike can take a ride on the aerial tram, the

newest attraction in the rain forest. Accompanied by a naturalist guide, visitors will enjoy a tram ride up the steep terrain of Morne Micotrin as they glide over, under and through the canopy where breathtaking scenery is visible in every direction. Halfway through the tour, riders can leave the tram for a leisurely stroll on a suspension bridge overlooking five waterfalls.

After a visit to the national park, travel north on the western coastline to Portsmouth, the island's second-largest village and home to the U.S.-based Ross University Medical School. The village of 2,000 residents is near the large natural harbor of Prince Rupert Bay, a popular place for windsurfing, snorkeling and other marine sports. Just north of Portsmouth on the Cabrits

Peninsula is the 260-acre (117-hectare) Cabrits Historical Marine Park. The park also includes 800 acres (360 hectares) of marine reserves in adjoining Douglas Bay, also a very popular snorkeling area. During August and September, the beaches are nesting areas for two species of turtles. A major project in the Cabrits Park is the restoration of Fort Shirley, a fort built by the British from 1770 to 1815. The rebuilding of the fort follows the original plans found preserved in England.

On the southwestern tip of the island is the small fishing village of Soufriere. Visitors will especially enjoy this quaint, picturesque village perched on the shores of a wide scenic bay. The bay ends at the village of Scotts Head where the Atlantic and Caribbean waters collide in the Martinique Channel. The Soufriere/Scotts Head Marine Reserve was the first reserve on the island established to protect the marine resources and manage its use for traditional and recreational purposes.

### Whale Watching

Whale watching is one of the most exciting adventures Dominica has to offer. The warm waters are home to numerous species, including a resident population of sperm whales typically sighted year-round. Large comfortable boats carry passengers to the best possible vantage points for whale sightings, and they are seldom disappointed. The boat staff is very accomplished at locating whales. Some staff members are scientists able to identify certain whales by name and number and explain their history and family groupings, making the whole experience educational as well as entertaining.

### Diving

The reefs that surround Dominica are as pristine and varied as its mountainous terrain, filled with an abundance of life that includes more than 190 species of fish native to the area. Divers of all levels will welcome the opportunity to explore the seemingly untouched reefs that exude a sense of health and vitality.

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A majority of dive sites are spread around the southwestern end of the island between Scotts Head and Roseau. Because of the island's volcanic origins, the seascape in this area varies, ranging from steeply rising pinnacles to shallow sites where volcanic vents send streams of bubbles dancing to the surface. Other sites in the vicinity around Scotts Head Pinnacle include

underwater peaks covered with large sea fans and vibrantly colored corals. Schools of jacks and blackbar soldierfish are frequent visitors to the area.

Midway up the western coast is Castaways Reef, a shallow area where southern stingrays often gather to feed and rest. Further north is Pole to Pole near the Cabrits cruise ship pier, an excellent site for finding flying

gurnards, bumblebee shrimp, sea horses and the odd-looking batfish. Toucari Caves, at the northern tip of the island, is a network of shallow caverns filled with black coral trees and golden sea sprays, creating an enchanting dive for all who venture through the caverns.

### Land of Celebrations

Dominica is a party place, with numerous celebrations held throughout the year. One of the main celebrations is Creole Day, held at the same time as Independence Day. Locals dress in colorful traditional costumes and participate in parades, competitions and other festivities throughout the celebration. Another event is the World Creole Music Festival, created in 1997. Known as "the festival that never sleeps," the festival has become a significant musical event on the island. It occurs each year in October in the town of Roseau where for three nights visitors and locals can sway to the rhythm of the unique sounds of Creole bands from countries around the world. All across the island Creole-oriented performances take place, and Creole language and foods are highlighted.

Another very popular event is Dive Fest, celebrating its 15th anniversary in July 2008.

Dive Fest originally began as a way to showcase Dominica's marine environment, and the locals are eager to share the island's marine riches with locals and visitors who are encouraged to experience the many watersports available on the island. Festivities take place along the entire eastern coastline and include events such as free scuba diving, snorkeling, kayaking and sailing. To round out the activities, all can enjoy a diversified menu of beach barbecues, wine tasting, whale watching and sunset cruises.

Dominica is truly a tropical paradise rich in diversity. From lush rain forests to healthy coral reefs, the island has much to offer for adventurous people who relish the challenges and pristine beauty of nature.