

The Zona Colonial Walking Tour

For many independent travelers, the idea of being herded like cattle around Santo Domingo in a shiny air-conditioned bus, while a tour guide glosses over names of historical buildings and makes painfully cheesy jokes, is a fate worse than death. Not to fear! This do-it-yourself walking tour is designed for travelers to indulge in quirky historical details, stroll the narrow, balcony-lined streets hung with laundry, and make leisurely stops to imbibe and refuel. The walk can take anywhere from two hours to two days, depending upon the pace and interests of the traveler. The goal is not to see everything as quickly as possible, but to promote a multisensory experience: step back in time and take in the stunning architecture, the smell of the sea intermingled with freshly cut pineapple, the sound of *bachata* blasting from a corner barber shop, the feel of polished stones meant to keep away the evil eye, and the taste of an earthy *mamajuana*.

With beautifully restored colonial edifices dating back to the early 16th century, the Zona Colonial conjures up the days when conquistadors roamed the cobblestone streets, Spanish monks were busy converting the “heathen” Tainos, and genteel Spanish ladies fanned themselves during their afternoon strolls. Today, each has its modern equivalent: the conquistadores have been replaced by male *tigueres* scheming their next female conquest; Evangelicals now take to the streets with megaphones in this predominantly Catholic nation; and women of all ages strut along the Conde while peering through the shop windows for the latest fashions.

Parque Independencia, La Puerta del Conde and Fuerte La Concepción

Begin the tour in the heart of downtown Santo Domingo, where old meets new, and history springs to life. To defend against pirate attacks in the early 16th century, the Spanish decided to build a thick wall of stone around the city, starting on the western and eastern sides. Construction began in 1543, but lack of laborers stalled progress until a crew of African slaves arrived in 1547. **La Puerta del Conde** was one of the original entrances to the walled city. Ironically, Sir Francis Drake used this entrance when he pillaged the city in 1586. Entering the La Puerta leads into **Parque Independencia**, home of the **Altar de la Patria** where the remains of Founding Fathers – Duarte, Mella, and Sánchez – reside. *Free; open everyday 8am-6pm or sunset.*

Puerta de la Misericordia

Heading south along Calle Palo Hincado is **La Puerta de la Misericordia**, where Dominican patriots led by Sánchez fired the first shots that signaled Dominican independence from Haiti on February 27, 1844. Heading east along Calle Arzobispo Nouel is the fine bakery and restaurant **Esquisiteces Virginia** (P. XX), a great spot to pick up fresh pastry or a home-style Dominican meal followed by a hot and sweet *cafecito*. *Corner of C/ Arzobispo Nouel and C/ Santomé.*

Home of Carlos Goico

Turning left on C/ Sanchez, before reaching the corner of Calle Padre Billini, is the former home and studio of expressionist painter Carlos Goico (1952-2009). The owner of a nearby falafel restaurant and admirer of Goico’s work lent the space to Goico, who could be seen toiling over a canvas, slathering on paint to form faces with bulged eyes or Carnival masks. Living simply in this closet-sized space, Goico

the most important Taíno provinces, be hung in 1503. Across C/ Padre Billini is the Dominican Church, completed in 1532, with additions in 1732 that include the stone ceiling and baroque accoutrements around the main entrance. On this site in 1511, Dominican Friar Antonio de Montesinos gave a speech condemning the severe Spanish *encomienda* plantation system that enslaved Taínos, which influenced Bartolomé de las Casas to do the same.

Parque Fray Bartolomé de las Casas

On the corner of Calles Padre Billini and Hostos is the former site of the Bartolomé de las Casas home, which was built in the mid-16th century. Known for his efforts to abolish the *encomienda* system, his grand solution to replenish the labor lost was to increase the number of African slaves brought to the island. He soon became opposed to both, for fear of the damnation of his soul. In 1552, his seminal *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (Brief Account on the Devastation of the Indies) was published, regarding the mistreatment of the indigenous population. De las Casas' reflective figure is immortalized in the center of the park in a sculpture by Juan de Vaqueros. On weekends, the park fills with artisans and their wares, taking on a lively atmosphere (See Art Galleries P.XXX).

Calle de las Damas

The first paved road of the New World, Calle de las Damas, was originally called Calle de la Fortaleza in honor of Fortaleza Ozama at its southern end. This changed in 1509 when Maria de Toledo, Diego's Columbus's wife, arrived on the scene with her ladies-in-waiting. Maria, accompanied by her coterie, needed a place to stroll in the cool afternoons, and so the road was extended and became known as the "Street of the Ladies."

Protector of the Indians

For his work in defense of the doomed indigenous population, de las Casa received the official title of Protector of the Indians in 1516. Because of his somewhat subversive activities, the title was revoked in 1520 and given to another friar. The Crown named several men to this post in its other colonies, but the title became irrelevant, and it soon ceased to exist.

De las Casas left Santo Domingo in 1520, traveled to other Spanish possessions, and eventually returned to Spain in the 1540s. In what was likely the first act in the anti-slavery movement, De las Casas entered into the celebrated Valladolid debates – presided over by the King of Spain Charles V in 1550-1551 – against the scholar Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. While Sepúlveda argued that the indigenous inhabitants could not be classified as people and Spain was therefore justified in using war, subjugation, and forced Catholic conversion in their conquest (supporting the *encomienda* system in place), de las Casas countered that, according to natural law, the native populations were rational and free men, if slightly less civilized, and should be dealt with in peace, including persuasive conversion to the Christian faith. Both orators claimed victory, but although the *encomienda* system was indeed weakened after the debates, violent colonization continued, and the real losers were those who had no representative at the debate: the indigenous population.

Fortaleza Ozama

Standing two hundred meters from where the Río Ozama meets the Caribbean Sea is La Fortaleza Ozama. Along with Fortaleza Santo Domingo on the eastern bank of the Río Ozama, Fortaleza Ozama was constructed to protect the river's mouth from ravenous buccaneers. Built in stages beginning in 1505, the Fortaleza's first structure was El Torre de Homenaje (Tower of Homage), making it the oldest standing European stone building in the Americas. The original entrance gate on Calle de las Damas was built in 1608. Known as the Prevention Gate, the foundation of its original Roman towers peeks through the looming stone walls built over it a century later. To the southwest of the main fortress is the Santa Barbara Powder House (known locally as El Polvorín), buttressed by ten feet thick walls to protect its highly explosive former contents. Observing from on high is a Juan Vaquero statue of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdéz, who was in command of the fortress from 1533-1557, but is better known for his opus, *General and Natural History of the Indies*. Serving a number of uses including as a military jail and later as a holding center for political dissidents under Trujillo, the space now hosts various and more benign cultural activities. *Entrance RD\$50; Everyday 9am-5pm*

Casa de Bastidas

This colonial building was the home of an accountant-explorer from Seville named Rodrigo de Bastidas who came with Nicolás de Ovando's fleet in 1502 to start a trade business with new clients. A savvy businessman, Bastidas capitalized on the Catholic Church's wholehearted campaigns of conversion by importing wheat and wine (elements crucial for communion), as well as underwear to dress the "heathen" Taínos. He also participated in the slave trade, but a pang of guilt and fear of fiery afterlife propelled him to join forces with Bartolomé de las Casas to establish the Santa Marta (in Colombia) and Coro (in Venezuela) settlements, designed for Spaniards and Indians to live in harmony. Located next to La Fortaleza Ozama, the residence took on a number of military uses. Today, it serves as the Trampolín children's museum.

Casa de Francia

Known as the House of France (since the French embassy and Alliance Française began occupying the space in 1999), it was originally built by Nicolás de Ovando. As discussed above, Santo Domingo was the lively stomping grounds for nearly every Spanish conquistador, and many lived in this very home. In fact, before waging his campaign against the Aztecs, Hernán Cortés rented the home from Ovando, followed by Francisco Pizarro, conqueror of Peru and Alonso de Ojeda, a particularly ruthless explorer, who focused his pillaging energies on Venezuela and Colombia. Spanish Baroque painter Diego Velázquez, known for his portraits of the Royal family, including his magnum opus, *Las Meninas*, also took up residence here.

Residencia del Gobernador Nicolás de Ovando

Ovando constructed many houses that he eventually rented to other colonists, but it was here – in one of the first stone buildings in the Americas – that he rested his head at night. After several renovations, the French hotel company Accor joined Ovando's massive, gothic-inspired home with two others, including that of the wealthy Dávila family, to fashion this luxury hotel with 125 rooms. Even before its

official conversion, the house saw some honored guests. In 1504, Ovando invited Columbus to his home to recover from his shipwreck in Jamaica on his fourth and final voyage to the Americas. In the mid-19th century, the first Dominican president, General Santana, took up residence here. Across from the hotel is the **Plazoleta María de Toledo**, named for Diego Columbus's wife. The Roman arches at the plaza's eastern entrance are all that remain of the monastery originally built on site.

Iglesia de los Jesuitas/Panteón Nacional (Jesuit Church/National Pantheon)

Though the building's foundation was laid in 1702 on the former site of another of Nicolás de Ovando's numerous houses, the Jesuits did not finish construction of the former church for another 50 years. Shortly after completion, King Charles III of Spain kicked the Jesuits out of the New World and claimed the church, which then took on such uses as a tobacco warehouse, a theater during the independence era, government offices, and eventually what it is today: a mausoleum. True to form, Trujillo envisioned the church as his own personal mausoleum, where the masses could worship his legacy. However, after his death in 1961, the idea of Trujillo's body entombed on national soil appalled Dominicans, so his remains were shipped to Paris. The building, along with the neighboring ivy-covered House of the Jesuits' School, was remodeled in the 1970s and converted into a mausoleum for all of the important players in the Dominican Republic's development, including writers, former presidents, and social reformers. The Pantheon is adorned with some rather loaded memorabilia from Trujillo's cronies such as the iron chandelier, a friendly offering from Franco, and the iron grates that form the shape of swastikas on the upper level, apparently a gift from Hitler.

House of the Jesuits' School is also known as the House of the Gargoyles for the stone guardians perched on the outer walls. Locals swear the Jesuits took these from the Cathedral Primada de las Americas.

Capilla de los Remedios (Chapel of Remedies/Chapel of Divine Help) or Capilla Dávila (Chapel of Dávila)

Francisco Dávila, a wealthy sugar plantation owner, built this chapel as a private place of worship for his family, but invited the other Spanish elite to join in worship here until the main Cathedral (P. XX) was completed in 1540. Having undergone remodeling in the 1880s after a fire, followed by another restoration in 1970, the building now hosts small artistic performances. An image of the Virgen de los Remedios (a statue of Mary brought to the New World by Spanish conquerors) resides inside the chapel, giving the building its name. Behind the chapel on the cliffs overlooking Río Ozama is the Dávila House, which has now been incorporated into the Nicolás de Ovando Hotel.

Museo Casas Reales and Reloj del Sol

What appears to be one giant house was once two edifices (distinguished by the shape of the windows on the second floor), until they were joined during a restoration following earthquake damage in 1673. Built in 1512, the house on the northern end was originally the home (*casas reales* – royal homes) and

Outside the museum is the Reloj del Sol, installed in 1753 so that during meetings city officials could keep time by looking out the windows of Las Casas Reales.

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office of colonial governors and captains-general. Another part of the building was dedicated to the Real Audiencia, or Royal Court, where most major decisions and judgments regarding early Spanish colonial exploits were made. The Royal Treasurer Cristobal de Santa Clara occupied the second floor of the southern end, erected in 1508, while the first floor was used as the House of Trade and Royal Treasury. In 1976, President Balaguer and Spanish King Juan Carlos I dedicated the museum that exhibit artifacts from the Hispanic era through the 18th century. Pieces of particular interest include Trujillo's private weapons collection and medical equipment used in Hospital San Nicolás de Bari. *RD\$30; 682-4202; Tues-Sun 9am-5pm; museodelacasas@verizon.net.do*

El Alcázar de Colón

After five years of construction, the second Admiral and third Governor of the Indies, Diego Columbus, and his wife María de Toledo moved in to this Mudéjar-style mansion in 1515. Even with their twelve children, this three-story, twenty-two-room home was extravagant. By 1770, the house was abandoned, and it was not until the 1950s that it was restored as a two-story building, most likely to cut costs off the nearly US\$1 million expense. The building houses the Museo Alázar de Colón, which showcases art and artifacts from the era, including a large display of tapestries. The museum also features period shows on Saturday nights, where actors dressed in colonial threads wander among spectators interested in catching a glimpse of 16th century life. In its refurbished stone glory, El Alcázar peers over the Río Ozama to the east and Plaza España to the west. *RD\$20; 9am-5pm Mon-Sun; 686-8657*

Plaza España

What was once a small Taíno farm, the Spanish quickly turned into a Plaza de Armas where colonial troops massed and trained. Today, this grand square is Plaza España, and remains an area of perpetual activity. The southern section was originally separate, when it was known as the Plaza del Contador (Accountant's Plaza) and served as a public market. Warehouses for shipping and trade bordered the expanse, one of which still remains and is now used as the ticket office for Casa de Colon. The cacophony of clanking iron from the adjacent Calle Los Herreros (Blacksmith's Street), has now been replaced with soft music and lively conversation coming from the chic restaurants that now line the cobbled street. At the center of it all is a statue of Nicolás de Ovando looking down upon his master scheme of gridded thoroughfares and organized chaos. In the evenings, locals and tourists gather for open-air concerts and festivities against the striking colonial scenery.

Calle La Atarazana

Heading north and downhill from Plaza España is Las Atarazanas, or the Drydocks, where traders stored their goods. One of the former warehouses now functions as the Museo de las Atarazanas Reales (Museum of the Royal Shipyards), full of coins, ceramics and other trinkets retrieved from the numerous shipwrecks around the island. The museum is located in front of **Playa de Retiro**, the site of an immense public market during colonial times where slaves were auctioned and then hauled off to the **La Negreta** building.

Calle Arzobispo Meriño to Fuerte de Santa Bárbara and Iglesia

Originally known as La Calle de los Pateros (Silversmith Street) or Calle las Canteras (Quarry Street), Calle Arzobispo Meriño was once home to candle makers, black-

smiths and occupations associated with shipping from sail makers to stevedores. This neighborhood, known as Santa Bárbara, has maintained its working class atmosphere, but these colonial occupations have been replaced with printers and tailors. The street also was once called Calle La Moneda for the Casa de Moneda (358 Arzobispo Meriño), where Charles V mandated the minting of silver coins. The building, known as La Casa de Medalliones (House of the Medallions), now houses the Dominican Philatelic Society. These stamp-collecting enthusiasts hold meetings every Sunday morning until about noon, and are always eager to share their knowledge of postage and the history it represents.

Iglesia Santa Bárbara was built in 1537, but fell victim to a hurricane, several earthquakes, Drake's fires, and other calamities. Its present state, therefore, is a fascinating jumble of architectural dissonance. Of note, Juan Pablo Duarte was baptized here.

Directly abutting the church is the fort of the same name, part of the series of defenses raised by colonial authorities to protect the city. It is one of the few remaining fortifications visible today.

Break for Art: Duendes del Caribe

While in barrio Santa Barbara, stop along the southernmost block of Calle General Cabral to revel in the local paintings and artisan wares of this truly original gallery and workshop. See Shopping (p. XX) for more details.

Calle General Cabral to Ermita de San Antón (Hermitage of San Antón)

Walking west (uphill) around the curve of Calle General Cabral, the original northern city walls can be observed amidst the comparatively new row of houses. This portion of the colonial walls was not constructed until the late 17th century, which is why the stone is in excellent condition compared to the western and eastern walls, erected over a century earlier. At the top of the hill, the road curves down to the left; find to the right a picturesque plaza with Ermita de San Antón (Hermitage of San Antón) at its crown. Governor Ovando decreed the building of this church in 1502, but in 1586, Sir Francis Drake let loose his pyromaniacal techniques on the charming stone edifice. Having undergone a number of restorations, the church took another hit in 1930 from Hurricane San Zenón, after which it has remained closed. Victims of the hurricane used the debris to build ramshackle homes along the plaza, which still stand today, though the owners have made some upgrades.

Las Ruínas del Monasterio de San Francisco de Asís

Run by the Franciscan Order of monks, the elegant San Francisco monastery and church was borne of the sweat and toil of African and Taino slaves. In this respect, the Franciscan and Dominican monks, who fought to abolish the *encomienda* system, differed greatly, with the Franciscans allying themselves with the Spanish elite. Though construction of the monastery, at the highest point in the city, began in 1544, official inauguration did not take place until 1664.

The grassy expanse to the west of the ruins served as a cemetery, where Bartolomé Colón and conquistador Alonso de Ojeda are buried. The monastery was left to decay following the order for all Franciscans to evacuate in 1795, and fell into further disrepair when its stone walls were used as building materials during the Haitian occupation. In 1885, Padre Billini turned the remnants into an insane asylum until 1930, after which it was used as a refuge for Spanish artists during the Spanish Civil

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War and World War II. An old man, the gatekeeper to Las Ruínas, occasionally waits by the locked gate, and he is always happy to show curious passersby around. Though his historical knowledge is not particularly abundant, he is full of anecdotes about the ruins' modern day uses such as weddings, photo shoots, and playing dominos.

If a break is in order, the *colmado* at the curve of Calle Hostos, **El Rinconcito de Don Guillermo**, has icy-cold *Presidentes* flowing freely around the umbrella-covered tables with the ruins creating a surreal backdrop.

Las Ruínas del Monasterio de San Francisco de Asís

As this was the city's tallest elevation, Santo Domingo's first aqueduct was also installed here, using gravity to feed water down to the Cathedral in the main square. Remnants of the original water wheel and reservoir still serve as reminders of its history and importance in colonial life.

Calle Hostos and Ruínas de Hospital San Nicolás de Bari

Head down Calle Hostos, where quaint wooden homes line this gorgeous, steep cobblestoned street. Take the high road up the elevated sidewalks for a view of the colonial city below.

After this stroll, cross Calle Mercedes to the ruins of Hospital San Nicolás de Bari. Though considered the first European hospital in the Americas, this hospital was actually the third built on this site. The earliest hospital was a simple wooden building from 1502, and the second, a small stone edifice built between 1512 and 1519. Hospital San Nicolás de Bari was constructed over twenty years, from 1533 to 1556, and remained in use until the early 20th century, when it was declared structurally unsound, and its *façade* collapsed. The adjoining church of San Nicolás de Bari was torn down during the building of the Iglesia Nuestra Señora de Altagracia (on the southeast corner of Calles Mercedes and Hostos), but La Concepcion, the church's inner chapel dating from the 1540s, was restored and is protected within La Altagracia. Architecturally stabilized to further prevent decay, the ruins now serve as a backdrop for cultural events and throwback photo opps.

Break for Art: Galería Ajoupa

Mix in some modernity with this spectacular Haitian art gallery featuring fantastical interpretations of rural life and modern religious depictions swathed in bright bold colors. 255 C/ Mercedes

Iglesia Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes

Rodrigo de Liendo, whose famous works include the Cathedral and Monastery of San Francisco, designed this stone church that ties in Romanesque and Moorish influences into its stunning bell tower as well as the slender Gothic structure in the interior. The church was built so delicately that in 1635 the roof caved, though it was subsequently repaired. The church's baroque altar is still used to split the Eucharist on Sundays, the best day to catch the church doors open. Next to the church on C/ Jose Reyes is the Our Lady of Mercy Convent, where Spanish friar Gabriel Tellez briefly took up residence. Using the nom de plume Tirso de Molina, he authored *El burlador de Sevilla y convidaada de piedra* (The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest) in 1630, the first written reference to the legendary Latin libertine Don Juan.

Iglesia de San Miguel

Heading north along Calle José Reyes towards Avenida Mella is the Iglesia de San Miguel, a simple church originally built of straw, then later in stone, and still in use today. The Plaza de la Restauración, in honor of the country's second independence from Spain in 1865, is located directly across the street, and has welcoming benches to take in the scene of men gathered around a game of dominoes and frolicking children.

Avenida Mella

Enterprising immigrants from Europe and the Middle East turned this neighborhood into a principal shopping district where locals flock for deals on clothing, house wares and fabric. Built around El Mercado Modelo, the area has declined in the past years since its golden era in the 1970s and 1980s as the shiny new malls have won over consumers' hearts. (See Malls P.XX)

El Conde, Refuel: La Cafetera

Knowledge alone cannot quench thirst, though some may beg to differ after observing the regulars at La Cafetera debate for hours while nursing a tiny coffee. Balmly days in the city send locals and visitors alike to sip one of La Cafetera's freshly made juices and *batidas*. (See Eat, p. XX)

Palacio Consistorial

Once the site of the old City Hall (hence its other name, Antiguo Ayuntamiento), this building was torn down after the Haitian occupation, and the newer adaptation of the current "Town Hall Palace" was constructed in 1920. The building's signature clock tower rises tall above Plaza Colón, the highest edifice in the area. Though rarely used today beyond occasional special events, the Hall is open to the public providing the opportunity to admire José Vela Zanetti's murals adorning the interior walls. *Open weekdays, allowing visitors to wander through the main wings.*

Plaza de Colón and Catedral de Nuestra Señora Santa María de la Encarnación (Cathedral of Our Holy Lady Mary of the Incarnation)

It was another three decades after Diego Columbus placed the cornerstone of the Cathedral in 1510 that the first section would be completed. After overcoming construction delays, in 1546 Pope Paul III deemed it "Primada de las Indias," or "Supreme Cathedral of the Indies," a highly esteemed position. Entering through the Gate of Pardons on the northern end of the Cathedral gives way to the repeated Gothic arches and twelve side chapels, well worth exploring as each has its own subtly unique history and style of construction. Exiting through the southern door, the Geraldini Gate, leads to the Priests' Alley, draped with bougainvillea, and eventually to Calle Arzobispo Nouel. The Cathedral was the final resting place for Columbus and his son, Diego, but in 1992, an urn of Columbus's presumed ashes was relocated to the Faro de Colón. *Open 8am-5pm daily.*

Plaza de Colon began as the governing and religious heart of the colonial city, a central square of sorts, with administrative offices built on the northern end and the imposing Cathedral to the south. Not wanting to miss out on the action, the wealthy built their mansions on the eastern side of the plaza, conveniently located to the outlet of the city's aqueduct that begins at the Monastery of San Francisco and piped water directly to the plaza. Galleries, restaurants and cigar shops replaced the government offices after the Presidential Palace was built in 1940 in Gazcue.

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