



Wanna go? The DR Difference

Perched as I am on the periphery of the travel business, I have a unique view of the various destinations around the world. Places have reputations, just like people or companies

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC'S reputation has for many years been all about very budget-priced packages that include airfare, lodging, food, and sometimes drink, with very few very high-end resorts.

Spanish is the official language. The populace is stratified into a working class of very dark descendants of African slaves, and a ruling-class of light-skinned descendants of the Spaniards. The native *Taino* Indian stock is all but eradicated and can no longer be distinguished. The economy is primarily agricultural, although tourism is becoming a factor. Poverty is the norm, and living conditions for the masses are poor, in terms of electricity and running water.

But in recent years, the DR's mix of holiday habitations has been improving. I'd never been there, but wanted to see what was going on, so when I got the chance to go there not merely as a tourist, I jumped at it.

APPROPRIATE PHILANTHROPY My friend Ross did his Peace Corps stint in the DR, and remains connected with La Cuchilla, his village. His focus there is on what we call "appropriate" philanthropy, that is, help given in right-sized doses, rather than the typically outsized involvement of Western donors, which often makes the situation worse. I like to say "Help isn't." My own definition of appropriate philanthropy is simply education: "...give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish..." Coincidentally, I had been reading and brought with me Dark Star Safari by Paul Theroux about philanthropy regimes in Africa. Oddly enough, the book was hard for me to read at home, amidst every comfort, but very easy to read in this very needy place.

So when Ross mentioned his plan to visit La Cuchilla again, staying in the home of his friend and associate Carlos, I thought it was a great excuse to tag along and work on my Spanish and snoop around the island.



Parillada dinner

On arrival in Santo Domingo at 11pm, Ross's friend Carlos took us straight through the old town of the oldest town in the Americas, founded by Bartolomeo Columbus in the closing years of the 15th century. On the *malecón* there I had excellent *parillada* (mixed grill)

and *chivo* (goat stew), washed down with the excellent local Presidente beer. Welcome to the DR!

CARLOS was a kid when Ross was in the DR, and now is a very successful businessman with a chain of *rifas* - kiosks which sell tickets to the national numbers game. Driving around with Carlos in his sparkling Toyota Prado was like riding with Robin Hood, or the Godfather: everywhere Carlos was recognized and warmly greeted, especially by the women, who would call out "*Carlos!*" and make eyes and flash giant smiles. I took to teasing him with "*¡Carlos!*" in a suggestive, feminine voice.



¡Carlos!

OUR GIVING So we were there to give computers to the school - OLPC laptops (www.laptopgiving.org) to the kids, and desktops to the teachers. We also gave to sponsor English lessons in town, and subsidize the daily bus to the University in the Capital Santo Domingo.

And as honored guests of the Fiesta, we were obliged to personally give cash prizes to the beauty contestants...tough work, but ya gotta do it. Not to mention the two bucks or something that we spent to give free tickets to the mobs of kids for a carnival ride or two.



Tough work

THE HAIRCUT I have developed some odd travel habits, haircuts being my newest trick. It started in Shanghai with 45 minutes of head, neck, shoulder and arm massage and 15 minutes of haircut for less than two bucks. Every place in La Cuchilla was full of people waiting - don't they have better things to do? - *but none of them needed a haircut!* We chose a shop and waited over two hours.

The last guy before me had barely 1/8" of already close-cropped tight black hair...45 minutes later he was down to 3/32"; what's up with that? I ended up with the shortest cut ever, except for when I shaved my head completely...but that's another story.



THE COCKFIGHT One night we attended a cockfight, escorted by one of Carlos' brothers, as always with a 9mm semi in his pants. Touts pushed through the crowds taking bets, and the fight was started amidst the roars of the crowd, which got louder as one cock scored against the other. But it was all over



when one of the birds seemed to falter; plenty of spectacle, but the actual fight was much ado about nothing - neither blood nor to the death. Nevertheless, I could just hear PETA fulminating against this pastime of so many of the world's people.

ROAD TRIP I had planned to spend four or five days with Ross and Carlos, then strike out on my own, visiting Puerto Plata and Samaná on the northern coast, Punta Cana and Casa de Campo in the southeast. But after a few days on Dominican roads, I refocused on just Punta Cana and Casa de Campo, and struck out for Punta Cana in one of Carlos' SUVs, blissfully unaware of State Dept. advisories about traveling alone in certain parts of the DR. And that Ross never goes anywhere without Carlos and his 9mm. And that there were some areas even Carlos wouldn't go, armed with guns *and* knowledge.

PUNTA CANA Visions of an old fishing village with *cantinas* and *hoteles* on the *malecón* drove me through the hellish five hours to Punta Cana, only to find... none of that. Just thick jungle hiding giant all-inclusive resorts, remote and self-contained bastions of hedonism hiding behind guard shacks. Perfect beaches and passable food, but only leisure - no enrichment of any kind: cultural, historical or otherwise.



My view of the beach at Punta Cana Resort & Club

I wasn't happy in my \$300/night shabby old room, but I did finish my Africa book in relative luxury. The beach was really beautiful as beaches go, but the water was not up to my snorkel standards. Must be sport-fishing, scuba and golf.

CASA DE CAMPO So I left for the holy grail of golf in the Caribbean: Casa de Campo. But this wasn't Eden for me either. The place is tired...*and no one speaks English*. I waited two hours lunching in grill...then another hour driving around...then at 4pm (check-in is 3pm) they finally let me in to my \$350USD room, which was nice enough, but not the end of all *luxe* or anything...guess you gotta love golf.

I was impressed, however, with the Marina, built to evoke Portofino. I've never been there, but it certainly was evocative of the Old World and put me in a Mediterranean frame of mind, smack dab in the middle of the Caribbean! One night I dined

alone at sundown at the Chinese restaurant on the piazza, one of the best evenings of the trip. Another night I dined at the marina with some golf guys I met on the plane coming over.

One day I drove over to Bayahibe, and found a real village, tucked away between the super-mega all-inclusive resorts. But it was chock full-o'parked tourist buses, all of them being out on a popular island just offshore for water sports, picnicking and such. Another afternoon was spent at C de C's private beach, with the intent to get pleasantly stewed on margaritas with my toes in the sand. But the service was so slow I could manage only seven before my Cuban sandwich was gone and a lounge chair an imperative.

Lately, wherever I go I buy jewelry made from indigenous gemstones for Woman. In the DR it was amber: earrings and a necklace pendant bought at Altos de Chavon, a quaint and very attractive shopping area built as an ancient Spanish village.



At Altos de Chavon

There is a very comprehensive anthropology and history museum at Altos, which along with the Marina were the highlights of Casa de Campo for me.

MEMORIES The Dominicans that I came to know are, for the most part, jovial, big-hearted and generally happy and satisfied with their way of life. What they lack in terms of education, organization, and creature comforts they make up for, I suppose, in simple well-being, although they aren't at the top of any global comparison charts in anything except baseball players and "value" holidays.

My most indelible memory was the incredible range of constant noise in the little village. Sounds of human life by day - children playing, laughing and crying, motor, and music, always, everywhere. And by night - still humans, laughing, drinking, partying, literally until dawn, and animals - nonstop chicken noise, and birds, dogs, and donkeys - you name it.

As I walked off the plane in Phoenix, happy to be home, I was even happier to be an American back in America. But I am intrigued with the DR...interested in all that I did not see this time...so I *will* be back...and maybe even perfect *mi Español*.

Wanna go?



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