

GIVING AND RECEIVING IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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I don't normally travel in a group, at least a group outside of my direct family. But this time Arran and I did. A group of 4, which is not large but it qualifies as a group. Trust me, things can go wrong. At least that's what I've heard from others and their travel tales, but as for us, they didn't.

What does one discuss when in a group of 4, or 5 when we were being so kindly shepherded to some of the best sites in the Dominican Republic by Fernando, our guide?

Many, many things: world politics, local politics, what rum is best, what rum is worst, why Lisey was the best Dominican ball team, why the Eagles were not and why would anyone cheer for them and honestly, Eric, why would you wear their green ball cap in public, what beach had had the best sand, what we would do if our spouse were to die before we did...

But if one statement sums up the fun of the trip (and the brutal honesty we enjoyed with our travelling companions), it was Kim's robust and confident contribution to that last subject of the previous paragraph, what would we do if our spouse died before we did.

"I'd get myself a tummy tuck and put myself out there!"

So honest and real that even Eric could not object.

The comment was made inside a large, 4-row, air-conditioned van driven by Fernando at speeds, and with a penchant for passing, that would probably make us nervous back home, but as we were sampling the rum and coke and Presidente beers, it seemed utterly normal. And it was warm and sunny in the DR. We were relaxed. Sweaty too due to the humidity, but that's okay if everyone smells roughly the same. No, no ... it wasn't that bad.

The van was made smaller due to the 5 extra-large bags containing baseball equipment destined for some local ball clubs that had very little equipment and would dearly appreciate it, but that wasn't until the end of day 4 on this 10-day venture into a less touristy itinerary of the beautiful Caribbean country. This trip was a little give and take. There was some giving, yes, as in the baseball equipment and some follow-up to the charitable events we had in Ottawa the past couple of years, and in planning future work trips. But also some take, as in Eric finally taking a Dominican vacation for a change, rather than

working, and being joined by Kim who was back for the first time in more than two decades to see people and places from those past visits, and to connect with the folks who contributed so much to the support of those targeted by the efforts of the charitable organization Perry Médico. And take as in Eric and Kim took Arran and me along for the ride, and we are grateful they did.

Our first two nights were at a hotel in Bayahibe, along the southern coast of DR. Fernando took us there after picking us up at the Punta Cana airport. There was a stop at a beautiful, and nearly empty, church along the way in Higüey, then a grocery store stop for the necessities like snacks, more beer and distilled water for my CPAP. Early the next day Fernando took us to a restaurant for a very tasty island breakfast followed by a boat ride to Isla Saona. As we neared the island our boat stopped and it was everyone in the water, even though we were well offshore. It turns out it wasn't very deep. In fact our arms which held the rum and cokes that were poured for us were comfortably dry while we sipped and walked about in the belly high water, sand under our toes, sun on our pale Canadian faces, surprise in our hearts that we could leave chilly Ottawa one day and be standing in warm Caribbean water the next. The island and beach and open bar and lunch buffet followed, all to be endured of course, for the sake of not wanting our friend Fernando to feel like we weren't enjoying ourselves.



The little poolside café in Bayahibe gave us such a good breakfast that we chose to eat there for dinner after our day at the beach, and the next morning too. The morning coffee was reported to be spectacular by those that had it (needed it!), and the meals were so tasty, Dominican styled ages and meats and fruit. I wish I could find the menu on-line to say what specialties we enjoyed but I've had no luck. It's just a happy memory.

We repeated the same the next day, this time at Isla Catalina. Oh the drudgery of repeating such an ordeal of beach and drinks and lunch all thrust on us as we leisured our afternoon away.

Then we were off to the north shore of the island and the nice little town of Las Terranas in the district known as Samana. Despite Fernando's ability to drive faster than anyone else on the road, it was a 4-hour trip and an evening meal would be required along the way. On this point of stopping for food, Eric voiced a request. Typically, on his trips to the DR in service of the charity, he and other volunteers are picked up by the nuns with a bus, complete with tasty sandwiches to nourish them on the drive. On those drives nature must be answered, and washroom breaks involve roadside stops at, for lack of a better descriptive word, cafeterias. But as they had sandwiches, Eric never ate there and on this trip, he wished to. So we did. We stood in line with the locals, pointed at what we would like and one of the ladies would ladle the selection onto a plate, with Fernando ensuring we weren't going too far off script.

We took our trays to an outdoor table and ate well. Very well. It was a great experience. We did it again for lunch on day 5 on the way to Yamasa.

Both Eric and Kim and Arran and I had nice little apartment units at the hotel in Las Terranas. The rooms were fine, the pool nice as we discovered when we swam, but the best part was the breakfast on the beach. A buffet was set up and ready to go at 8 sharp each day and we were there, 7:55 at the latest, pouring our coffee / tea / chocolate early and enjoying the sea around us, the sand below us, and the stray dogs beside us, looking like they could use whatever morsel we left behind.



After two days of island beach Fernando switched it up and took us instead to a beach that wasn't on an island. Phew! We were thankful he broke the monotony of those wretched island beaches. On the way we stopped in the town of Samana and walked a causeway sort of bridge to a small island in the bay, and back again, a nice way to get in some steps. Then it was back in the van and off to Playa Rincon, which Fernando promised we would love.

The man knows how to keep a promise. It was stunning. We weren't the only ones there by any stretch but still it was quiet, overwhelmingly beautiful with rocky outcrops and perfect swimming and views across the water of dark green hills where everything in this weather grew high and happy. It was easy to kick back and enjoy. A nap may have occurred. A pinch to confirm we were really there might have been part of the itinerary as well.



Our second day venturing out of Las Terranas took us back to the ho-hum dull old island beach scene, but for the sake of diplomacy we did our best to put on a brave face and pretend we were enjoying our asses off. We were. It was tough to fake it. The weather on Bacardi Beach was warm and soothing, the company excellent and we chatted and laughed and forgot all about our children wearing their parkas back home. Never gave them a second thought. Nope, not once.

With two evenings in Las Terranas it was up to us to find supper as evening meals were not part of the tour we had booked. The first night, just the 4 of us, we found an excellent spot in the heart of town. Everything we ordered was tasty. Eric discussed with the young waiter what type of rum he should have following the meal and an excellent choice was made based on his happy expression. The second night we went to a Thai Fusion place that we had spotted, fusion as in combining Thai and Dominican food. Fernando joined us and to the best of our knowledge, it was his introduction to Thai food. I had the Dominican Pad Thai. How could you go wrong with fusing those two influences? My mouth waters as I think of it now. Plus I had a drink of mint and lime that was so fresh, so *intense*, so GOOD. I've tried (unsuccessfully) to replicate it since.

Sadly we left Las Terranas for the drive to Yamasa. Along the way Fernando felt we should have a swim, just to keep the days consistent, and since we were not near the coast, he forced us to swim in a waterfall. It was a very cool experience. We floated as close to the falling water as we could get but could not get directly under the falling rush as it was just too strong and fell too heavily. I have little hair left to part but if I was able to get right underneath, there may have been a permanent part taking place. I was content to just get close. The water was much cooler than the ocean and given the heat of the DR, most welcome.



We ate at another roadside cafeteria, which was just as terrific as the first time. I indulged in a little dessert, which I am known to do ~~from time to time~~ *every day*. Vanilla custard is a weakness and the dessert I had, best described as custard pudding with cornmeal, is called majarete and it was so good!

As we arrived in Yamasa we went straight to a baseball field complex where a team was practicing, and it started to rain. As we watched the kids, ages ranging from perhaps 6 to 16, all very skilled for their age, I was most impressed with a few kids running hard to first base and rounding the bag, in *FLIP FLOPS*. And successfully, quickly, on a wet diamond, like they had \$200 cleats on their feet. We also noticed that the pitchers didn't throw hard to the batters, it was just a light toss because there was no catchers gear so no one would crouch back there in case a tipped ball took out teeth or worse. I was handed one of the practice balls. It was dark and heavy and well after it's best before date. It was in the kind of condition we would have tossed in the garbage back home weeks, months ago.

It was the same story and worse at the other three ball diamonds we went to where clubs were practicing and greeting us and oh so thrilled to see the huge bag of equipment we carried to give them. Bats, balls, catchers gear, gloves, shirts, the lot. One group let out an audible “ooooo” when the bag was opened. One lad at the most impoverished village (El Canyo, a batey, which is an old sugar cane town where housing is often makeshift sheet metal shanties once meant to house the workers ... windowless cement dwellings in the village were upscale) quickly scooped up a ball glove that goes on his right hand. I confirmed through basic sign language that he was a lefty and by the look on his face I am guessing that he’d never had a real glove on the proper hand before. He looked like he didn’t plan to take it off for anything.

This equipment was kindly donated by Kanata Little League as well as individual friends. Equipment that was too old or worn and had been replaced by newer and better (or in the case of friends, equipment of children who had outgrown it or even loved ones who had passed away). And yet it was received like it was shiny new on Christmas morning. It was a series of very awesome moments to be part of and we enjoyed those moments a lot. I felt lucky to be there.

Baseball, for the precious few that make it to the professional level, is an avenue out of poverty. But we learned that so too was education. The folks we met in Yamasa, Eric and Kim’s friends who they had been interacting with for decades, worked hand-in-hand with the Canadian charity Perry Médico, supporting those in need in their community. The friends are successful people, many are university educated, and they carried the burden of responsibility for those around them that we don’t often see. They also helped others get the educations that they had the potential for. They helped even more people with medical care and pharmaceuticals and equipment. They helped still more with the basics of food and home necessities where it was needed, and advice and guidance where that was needed too, as in the case of young girls who had become unplanned mothers. So too was the help from the Grey Nuns, instrumental in delivering on the programs and no matter your spiritual leaning, these ladies are to be admired for the commitment and kindness. The local social ties and the net which enveloped so many in need were unexpected. It shouldn’t have been, and I feel a bit ashamed that I hadn’t realized it until I was there. I think of these charities we have in Canada, like Perry Médico and many others, and occasionally might pat myself on the back for this money we raise and all the little things we can send there, thinking we are doing so much. We are, of course, and it’s necessary, but it was brought home to me very clearly that we are not really helping those in need in the DR directly. Rather we are helping many wonderful people in the DR who in turn are the ones to REALLY HELP those in their community that need it. What we do in Canada is important, but what Fernando, and Mecho and Noellia, and Rosehermenia, and Angela, and Wilton, and Leo, and Mercedes, and Anna, and so on and so on, do is profoundly more important and I was affected and humbled by the spirit of their care and effort.

Once in Yamasa the tone of our trip changed significantly. No more beaches, transport by air-conditioned van, or seemingly unlimited food and drink. Instead, we met and hung out with friends, with Eric’s community. He took us on a walk around the town (population of less than 50,000, it felt like walking around a place the size of Perth) where we met “my madres” (my mothers). These were the ladies and their families who had hosted and supported those from the charity visiting and working over the years. We met some great people.

One of the best aspects of the trip that was especially true in Yamasa was the food. I mean, food is always great isn’t it, it reflects a culture and over a meal the traveler shares a moment in the society they are visiting. It is even more meaningful when it involves sharing a meal with people who live there, which we did for 17 of the 32 meals we had on the trip. One or more DR friends sat and communed with

us over breakfast, lunch or dinner. In Mecho and Noellia's home, where Eric and Kim were staying for the 3 nights we had in Yamasa, we were invited to join them for breakfast as well as one dinner and their kindness was memorable. Fernando's wife's family own an event site known as Nosa Finca (which means Our Farm, and there they host weddings and other events) and we had supper one day and a lunch the next. There was a dozen or so of us at a long outdoor table, cows grazing at the shrubs behind our chairs, food appearing from the outdoor kitchen, and much chatter and laughter between bites.

At the supper there was also one special item served. Mamajuana. Before you get your knickers in a knot over the legality of drugs in the DR, or question our sanity in partaking, this is not marijuana, but mamajuana, a drink. A very potent drink. Delicious too. In fact, it is the national drink of the Dominican Republic, made from a blend of Dominican rum, red wine, honey, and a unique mixture of herbs, roots, and bark, and dates back to the Taino Indians, the island's original inhabitants. It was poured into shot glasses which then found their way to our lips, sweet and delicious and delivering a kick, it was heartily enjoyed. So we had another.

During our stay in Yamasa we also visited the clinic where Eric spends so much time on his work trips which are typically focused on testing hearing and repairing or dispensing hearing devices. He told us that each morning the line is out the door, down the stairs and around the corner. It's an invaluable service. We also saw the room where many pharmaceuticals are stored, again provided through the hard work and generous funds provided from both Canada and the DR. Dollars are also stockpiled for the nuns to directly help families be able to buy food and basic supplies. The energy everyone has for these endeavors is amazing.

Our days in Yamasa were spent within the town limits except for two deliveries of baseball gear to nearby towns, plus a trip to where some impressive pottery is forged, and one little 90-minute late afternoon drive to the capital of Santo Domingo to see a professional baseball game. My wheelhouse. My happy place.

The Dominican league has 6 teams and many of the players and managers are or were players from major league baseball. The stadium was full and rocking as we found seats (not our seats mind you, the seats designated on our tickets are not meant to be taken literally, so we took the first 7 in a row we could find, which was the size of our group that night). We watched the warmups, a little BP, the national anthem, and then the first 4 batters (a groundout, a strikeout, then two singles) before the rain came in earnest. Everyone took cover in the cramped indoor area, but by the time we got there we were soaked through. No matter, when the rain ended, we hoped that the sun would come out to dry us, which it did, and we bought hot dogs and watched arguments being waged over seats near us (possibly because of our seat choices but we feigned innocence) and waited for the game to resume. It almost did. It wanted to. We made offers to the weather gods to have the rainclouds bypass the stadium, but to no avail. Another round of drenching, party-pooing rainfall began, and we made for the van and called it a night. It may have only been a 4-batter game but it was plenty of fun. The vibe was different. The passion was insistent. It was like taking the most rabid 10% of Philadelphia fans and packing a stadium with them. Kind of like that. But without the violence.



Our time in Yamasa came to an end and a taxi was arranged to take us to our final stop, a hotel in the capital of Santo Domingo, on the edge of the old town.

Santo Domingo is a big city with big city traffic, poverty, crime and noise. We took a taxi to a big shopping mall, only an hour's walk away (which is totally reasonable for any Canadian who likes to get a good walk in!) but we were told not to, not even in daylight, as it would be unsafe. Waiting for an uber was an exercise in patience as we watched the car icon on the app inch along in gridlock. The city sprawled from one core area to another but the most picturesque to me was the old town with some historic buildings along Las Damas street, and old shaded squares, and terraces overlooking the river, and restaurants tacky and spectacular. We avoided tacky. We chose spectacular instead. Or rather, they were chosen for us, by our local friends.

Our two dinners had company, at Buche Perico with Anna (whose airBNB we had stayed at in Yamasa and whose family is involved in the local charitable efforts) and at Maraca with Carlos (who was integral to Perry Médico for a few years and is now at university in Santo Domingo). They selected the restaurants and they were both incredible. If asked to rank one higher than the other, I refuse. Instead, I will plead the spinal tap and rate them both Elevens. They were. Honest. They go to eleven. We've eaten at some great restaurants over the past few years, all over the world in fact, and these two are in the top 5. Unbelievably great flavours in every appetizer and main we tried, well presented, and not that it influences the enjoyment of the food, but the cost was embarrassingly low for what we devoured. I wish they were in Ottawa, I'd be going once a week.

We also ate at an outdoor patio on the edge of the main square, a place Eric favours on his trips there. It was also really good and the atmosphere just awesome. By this point of the trip you'd think we would be sniping at one another, sitting awkwardly so as to not have to face each other or talk, or be glancing at our watches to see just how many more hours we had to endure with one another, but NO! We were still having a great time, going from solving the world's problems in one breath then telling the funniest jokes in history the next. We are just those kinds of people and were having just that kind of time.

Then regrettably, time was up. A driver met us outside the hotel late the final morning and we were off along the highway to Punta Cana and our date with a WestJet flight back to the cold reality of home. It's nice to go home, except, I suppose, for the cold and the reality, both of which we escaped so nicely and with such nice folks, foreign and domestic, for those 10 days.