

WHERE ARE YOU FROM (NOTES FROM PUERTO RICO 2023)

“Where are you from?” he asked.

This is nice, I thought. I ask that question a dozen times a day on vacation, posed to whoever I might have just met, usually after a brief exchange of some meaningless reason to break the ice. How are the waffles / is that a Patriots cap / is that your child kicking my shins? A moment of banter follows then I go in for what I’m really curious about: where are you from? On this January 2023 trip, 6 days in San Juan Puerto Rico and 7 days on a cruise to 6 other islands, the responses are as expected: Minnesota / Grand Rapids / Whitby (never forgave that city for the nasty team we played in a tournament 10 years ago) / Moncton. But isn’t it nice to be asked yourself.

The person doing the asking is the young man who manages the morning desk at our San Juan hotel, the Casa Wilson. We have just verified that the 75-minute walk from the hotel to a large shopping centre is do-able and safe. At first he had said no because a) we’d have to walk on a highway, b) why wouldn’t we Uber it, c) walking is totally unnecessary, but when I showed my google maps route he acknowledged that those were, in fact, real streets with sidewalks and surprisingly, it was possible. But then he looked at me quizzically and asked, “where are you from?”

“Ottawa, Canada.”

Then he says: “Does everyone in Canada walk to where they are going?” He genuinely wants to know. He genuinely can’t understand why we would walk for over an hour in the Puerto Rican heat when we could take an air-conditioned cabbie.

“Some of us do,” I answer.

We managed to get many many steps in around San Juan, and also on the islands of Sint Maarten, Antigua, Barbados, St Kitts and USVI. The steps were necessary to counter the abundance of food at the Puerto Rican restaurants and on board the ship. Very delicious food. We went back a second time to di Zucchero on Ashford, near the hotel, for the Boricua pizza (ground beef / sweet plantains / peppers / onions / bacon / local cheese) and on the drive around the island, the mofongo we had at Boquerón and the bites from the food market in Ponce were fantastic.

During the aforementioned steps on the trip, I was able to employ my Man Greeting many times. This is a brief but very important ceremony for my gender. It’s a North American thing, as Europeans seldom make eye contact. The Man Greeting is the standard greeting when passing another man whether walking, jogging, or sitting on a bench. It’s not expected per se, but it’s the polite thing to do. There are stages of the Man Greeting, you know them of course, but I’ll repeat them for any women that may be reading and are unfamiliar with the subtleties of the male hello.

Here are the universally accepted steps of the Man Greeting:

1. Make eye contact
2. Purse lips slightly
3. Nod exactly 1.5 inches
4. Look away

There it is. Yes, guys, you just tried it to make sure you do it right, I know you did. And it did feel right! The Man Greeting is a part of us and is also covid safe!

Ladies, you tried it too, and you are befuddled but that's okay. You don't need to understand everything we do. On the ledger of life, when it comes to understanding the opposite sex, we are sorely lacking so give us this one, won't you?

This says how-do-you-do and have-a-nice-day all in one and we pass knowing that we have not let a compatriot go unnoticed. It's important to do the steps in the right order and to the proper degree. A large sudden grin instead of the minor lip pursing will cause confusion in your Man Greeting target and may even get you smacked. And limiting the nod to 1.5 inches is important to send a meaningful but not over-exuberant hello. A much bigger nod to someone from those extra-friendly southern states might escalate to the exchange of bear hugs and hours of old family photos.

Cruise ships make me happy but don't excite me. Generally, if a place is worth visiting then I want to be there more than one day, and go for quiet morning strolls before the cruise ships have docked and especially in the evening after the masses from the cruise ships have left. We chose this cruise because none of the islands the cruise was going to were on our list of places we needed to see, and because we stopped at an island every single day. There were no days at sea. That's a big advantage of flying to San Juan and leaving from there, it's already closer to the destination islands than the Florida coast is. We also totally enjoyed the five days we spent on Puerto Rico before leaving.

Some highlights were Lindbergh Bay Beach on Charlotte Amalie, right next to the airport. The beach was gentle and warm and very few people were there so it was quiet in one sense but every few minutes a plane would take off at the airport right next to us and it was thrilling to watch them go with the warm waters lapping on our ankles. There wasn't much to do at Frederiksted, USVI, but we walked to Rainbow Beach and swam with the folks from Minneapolis, trying to balance our feet on the rocks in waist deep water while the surf tried to move us off them. At Barbados we rejected the offers of tour buses and taxis and walked to Rockley Beach, rented a chair and canopy and swam the afternoon away, complete with some drinks and snacks at nearby food stalls. It was a walk of 75-90 minutes each way but we had all day so it was interesting to see the town as well, not just bypass it in the back of a shuttle bus. We made a couple of food purchases in the open market and it felt like we were the only non-residents there, so we appreciated the feeling of authenticity as we visited for a few minutes.

Lots of cruisers take excursions, often booked through the ship but private tours are available too (and I heard of some good ones). On Sint Maarten I really wanted to visit Maho Beach, where planes come in over the beach so low that they could part your hair. The runway is only a few meters from the beach so it's a very unique experience, and it did not disappoint even though the beach was packed. The excursion was essentially the ride to and from with a running commentary of what we were passing. By booking with a ship excursion we were almost certain to not have a delay and miss our ship. Being late for the ship is considered a bad thing. Very bad. They leave without you.

Our other excursion was a few days later on St Kitts. Here we would kayak and snorkel in the clear blue sea. This involved meeting in a group right after docking and being taken on a 20-minute drive by small tour bus over Timothy's Hill (where you can see the Atlantic on one side and the Caribbean on the other)

to South Friars Bay. There were 23 friendly but mostly quiet folk on the bus and we listened politely as the driver gave an excellent description of places and personalities that highlighted recent and distant history on St Kitts and sister Island Nevis. We could hear every word very clearly.

Once at the beach at South Friars Bay, there was a quick refresher on how not to tip over and we were off, 2 to a kayak into some solid waves. After 30 minutes our guides directed us into a protected cove known as Potato Bay and the snorkeling began. Fish of every dazzling colour and pattern were spectacular, and we also saw sea turtles, stingrays and juvenile squid. Only one swimmer managed to scrape his knees across rocks and choral (not me) and had to be hauled with difficulty (he was a large man ... again, it was not me) bleeding into the boat. Later we held star fish and sea urchins (pulsing in your hand when refreshed with water).

We kayaked back to the original beach where guide Mikey had prepared what we thought was our snack. Well, the snack was a little short on solids. It was a large thermos, something like a 5 gallon water jug, of rum punch. We obliged him and had a drink. We obliged him and had another. Soon thoughts of the lack of food were of no concern. Conversations picked up. Everyone became more chatty, Arran and me included. Max from Wisconsin wore a hockey hat and played twice a week but needed knee surgery. His buddy Robbie wanted to come hunting and fishing in Canada and now he could because he explained proudly that his DUI that had disqualified him was past 10 years. The folks from Florida, originally Alaska, talked about their move and their kids and what they had for breakfast. We had another punch. The guides were making jokes and they all seemed to be incredibly funny. Some guests refilled their water bottles with the leftover punch. We tipped the guides more than we should have as we climbed back onto the bus (that couldn't have been the reason for potent punch could it??). The older ladies from Minnesota, in their 70s, were holding their bottles high for everyone to toast and cheer. The driver attempted to say something to us, now speaking (nay, yelling) over his microphone and speaker but we heard nothing above the ruckus and revelry. It was like a bus full of unsupervised 8-year-olds, turning around in their seats, laughing, shouting. And now the older ladies from Minnesota were trying to get everyone to join them on the water slides when we got back. Almost everyone was shouting their excited words across the seats and aisles of the small tour bus. The couple in their late 60s sitting ahead of us tried to whisper to each other their plans when returning to the cabin but whispering was not possible and I learned that a nap was not on the agenda.

On board the cruise ship the entertainment is hit and miss. The Gold Art Duo we saw was equal parts daring, surprising, awesome and funny. I've already saved some YouTube videos such as the incredible laser act, stylish and unexpected. Or the human balloon which is hilarious, we almost fell off our chairs. Over the course of the act, the main performer literally climbs inside a balloon. His gestures and mannerisms and facial expressions (like when his head reappears, the rest of his body in the balloon and his arms and legs spread like a starfish) had us all in stitches.

But all good things come to an end, like the Gold Art Duo and the cruise itself and after returning to old San Juan we caught a late-night flight back to Ottawa by way of Newark. Back to where we are from.