

Quisqueya – The Mother of All Lands

By Chris Robinson



Chris Robinson host of Canada's most listened to Travel Shows, shares some of the delights and insider secrets of the popular Dominican Republic.

Long years before Christopher Columbus stepped ashore on the island of Hispaniola on Christmas Eve of 1492, in what is now the Dominican Republic, the local Taino people had a lyrical name for their homeland: Quisqueya. This translates to “mother of all lands”, and so it was to the peaceful culture that flourished for half a millennium in a tropical paradise. The Taino were skilful farmers and fishermen who led contented lives made possible by easy food surpluses and a benign climate. They had leisure time to enjoy dances, music and ball games – activities which can be glimpsed in some of the fascinating artifacts and historical sites that can be seen by today's modern visitors.

The first of these visitors, Christopher Columbus himself, wrote of the Tainos – who numbered half a million at the time – “I assure your Highness that in all the world there is no better people nor better country.

They love their neighbours as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing.” The laughing died within a generation of these words being written, and by 1550 the Taino were no more than a memory, but one that lives on through place names, museums of native life and some fascinating archaeological sites that provide travellers with glimpses of their lives.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and today's Quisqueya reverberates once more with music, dance and ball games. Today it is the merengue and baseball that captures the spirit of Dominicans and provides a unique window into Dominican culture for Canadian visitors to the country. It is almost impossible to avoid the infectious rhythm of the merengue. In taxis and buses, drifting out of windows in the street, from boom-boxes strapped

to the back of rickety bicycles...the music of the merengue tells the Dominican story better than any guidebook possibly could. And it is so accessible to the visitor: most resorts will feature evening entertainment that includes merengue and many have entertainment staff on hand to teach stiff Canadians how to be caught up in the magic of the music - for above all, the merengue demands participation. To sit on the sidelines when merengue is playing is to be an outsider – far better to dive right in, even if you have two left feet like me!

Whenever we feature the ever popular Dominican Republic on my Travel Shows I know that among the first listener questions into the show will be several on merengue...and even more on baseball. The country is baseball crazy. “It's more than just a game, it's our passion, it is almost our way of life” is the popular explanation.

And so it seems. There are normally around fifty Dominicans playing in major leagues and famous Dominican names include Pedro Martinez, Alex Rodriguez and Sammy

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Sosa. The local league is considered a stepping-stone to the majors and if your visit coincides with the season (October to February), there is no better way to soak up the local atmosphere than to go to a game. If you are staying in the north, then the Aquillas in Santiago are your team; in the south, try either the Estrellas in San Pedro de Macoris, or the Leones who play in the capital of Santo Domingo in the appropriately named Quisqueya Stadium.



I am often asked which of the three main vacation areas in the Dominican Republic is "the best". An impossible question, of course. But here are some thoughts which may help you decide which part of this earthly paradise you plan to visit next time you head south. In the East, there are the silky white sand beaches of Punta Cana, which are amongst the finest in the world. Shaded by lofty palms and fringed by tropical reefs and turquoise waters, the luxurious resorts in the area, including several of the world famous RIU chain of hotels, provide all you need for a perfectly relaxing beach holiday.

To explore the wilder side of life, go to one of the resorts beside the northern shores around Puerto Plata. There are great beaches here too of course, but there are also some wonderful opportunities to see the natural wonders of the Dominican Republic. Take a trip up into the mountains to Jarabacoa where you can swim beneath spectacular waterfalls, horse-back ride on flower-strewn trails and river raft safely down mountain torrents. For the really adventurous, plan to hike up the highest mountain in the Caribbean, Pico Duarte, which is 3,175 metres high and was only climbed for the first time in 1944. This trip takes three days and

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requires local guides for safety. Out at sea, The Silver Bank just north of Puerto Plata, is a winter home to whales, turtles and marine mammals in a shallow coral and lagoon area, while the gathering of thousands of humpback whales in Samana Bay in January and February each year is a sight never to be forgotten.

On the south coast lie the resort areas of Juan Dolio, Bayahibe and Boca Chica accessed by charter flights to La Romana. Again, the



beaches are fine (particularly those around the beautiful island of Saona, part of the Parque Nacional del Este), but here the highlight is easy access to the rich history of the country. And the jewel in the crown is the capital city of Santo Domingo, "the first city of the New World". It's a crazy, colourful phantasmagoria of a city, with two million inhabitants, traffic jams of monumental proportions, but with a historical heartbeat that has to be experienced to be believed. Founded in 1496 by

Columbus' brother Bartholomew and ruled over by Columbus's son Diego as first Governor, the city has most of the firsts of America's European era and a host of Columbus family connections.

Diego's imposing imperial house still stands on the banks of the city's Ozama River; the Calle de las Damas built in 1502 is the oldest street in the Americas; the Cathedral of Santa Maria is the oldest church this side of the Atlantic, its first stone being laid

by Diego Columbus in 1514...and the list goes on: castles, palaces and museums abound. The one 'don't miss' museum is Museo del Hombre Dominicano, the Museum of the Dominican Man. The displays here provide a vivid reminder of the island before the Columbus family arrived: Taino monoliths, jewellery, axes, pottery and the stone head of the God of the Dead. But for me the highlight is to be found on the third floor of the museum: the thrones from which the caciques – the Taino leaders – led religious ceremonies in the island paradise they knew as Quisqueya, the mother of all lands.

Travel Notes

A number of Canadian Tour Operators feature one and two week vacations all year round to the resorts of the Dominican Republic. Transat Holidays are opening up resorts in the hot new destination of Samana, where you can see the Humpback whales in season. Particularly recommended resorts: the Bahia Principe resorts in Samana; any of the RIU hotels in Punta Cana; the Grand Flamenco Puerto Plata by Occidental in the north; and the Costa Caribe Coral by Hilton in Juan Dolio in the La Romana area.

Insider tips: The Festival of the Merengue takes place in July and August – a great time to experience this musical magic. Hire an English speaking guide at the Museo del Hombre Dominicano for about \$5 who will make your visit truly memorable.

