

ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE  
Travel Sunday

# Anything can happen in the Dominican Republic

By Laurie Mercer



Webber, drinking at the first table, and friends in La Castilla Bar.

“Do not be surprised if you see a donkey on the highway...”

The words, spoken just the night before by a handsome Dominican playboy, echoed in my ears. He threw back his head and laughed when he said, “In this country, anything can happen.” And it usually does.

The Dominican Republic occupies two-thirds of the island it shares with Haiti. Native tribes, Lucayos, Tainos, Ciguayos and Caribes called the land “Quisqueya,” Mother of Earth, before Christopher Columbus arrived on December 5, 1492.

In the Dominican Republic today, there are strips of civilization centered along avenues of electricity. The highway that links the capitol of Santo Domingo with the famous pirate town of Puerto Plata is one such road.

As I hurtled along this road in a car, passing by palm frond stands and people selling everything from raw sugar cane to dented cub cups, the remark about the donkey on the highway came to mind. Donkeys, horses, goats, and even pigs tied to telephone poles appeared with such rapidity that I found myself blinking as if to keep up.

Great expanses of lush vegetation appeared between the little settlements.

NEW WORLD HISTORY is minted in gold and silver, with drastic changes in old world commerce as it was known at that time. Suddenly, lots of gold coins were possible, making bartering or trading obsolete.

The second largest gold mine in the world is in the Dominican Republic. The town I was hurtling towards, Puerto Plata, was named for the silver still mined from her coast. Silver is also the name they gave the great coral reef that lies 65 miles off the shore.

The reef was known as Abrojos, meaning open your eyes, until its legend for snagging rich treasure ships encouraged them to rename it Silver Banks.

LaNuestra Senora de Limpia Y Pura Conception was no exception. She sank there on October 30, 1641 with 100 tons of gold, silver, pearls, artifacts, and trade goods from the Orient and 525 lives on board.

The Conception was one of the richest ships ever to sail from Spain's new world colonies. She sailed north from Cuba, heading towards the Carolinas, where strong westerly winds would blow her across the Atlantic Ocean and home to Spain. Dismasted by a hurricane off the Florida Strait, she drifted helplessly for three weeks until another storm struck and forced her on the Silver Banks.

Her logbook recalled memories of death and treasure as some survivors made rafts to sail for shore while others elected to stay with the treasure, waiting for a rescue that never came.

IT WAS IN the town of Puerto Plaza, 46 years after she sank that American colonist William Phips reportedly met a Concepcion survivor, who helped him find the wreck. Phips salvaged 26 tons of precious cargo using native divers, and the booty, which Phips claimed for England, made him a hero. He was knighted and appointed Governor of Massachusetts colony.

The search for the Conception resulted in a book and television show for Jacques-Yves Cousteau, but in the 337 years since William Phips, the Conception has not been found.

I wandered from my sidewalk walking tour admiring Puerto Plata's Victorian architecture because of the sound of some decidedly American music coming from La Castilla Bar.

Inside the bar I got my first look at contemporary treasure hunters. Men with scrimshaw belt-buckles. Men with matching PhipsII T-shirts. Men with pieces of eight around their necks. A crew of 14, including 6 divers, had just arrived from Miami. Their ship, a converted 11-foot British Navy mine sweeper, had previously been chartered by former Beatle Paul McCartney and his band, Wings.

The American press had been alerted to their mission. Dominican Navy gunboats were standing by should the Conception be found.

IT WAS THE day before Thanksgiving and the omens were inauspicious. La Castella's owner said the turkey he had been fattening for the American holiday had just fallen into the cistern and drowned. I ended up sharing another turkey with two treasure hunters, PhipsII leader Pennsylvanian Burt Webber and California free lance writer John Grissin, and National Geographic photographer Jonathan Blair.

Talking treasure over turkey proved fascinating. The story the treasure hunters told me convinced me that the Concepcion was hiding in plain site.

Webber's company, Seaquest International, collected private investments of \$450,000 to outfit PhipsII. The prospectus for investors estimates the current value of the cargo at \$189 million, but the

truth of treasure is that it's worth whatever you can get for it, and in this case the Dominican government will get half.

Backing a treasure hunt is looked upon by some as a form of tax shelter, but for others it's a chance at a vicarious thrill in a world too often short of mysteries. Treasure hunts are also notoriously disappointing.

The ocean floor becomes a very big place as men and women in wet suits with gurgling canisters of oxygen strapped to their backs enter a realm never intended for their kind.

There has also been litigation over international boundaries and accidents do happen resulting in a watery grave.

WEBBER SPENT five months looking for the Conception last year. Armed with an important new piece of information and new equipment, he said finding the wreck was only a matter of time.

Early last year, a researcher found a 1687 Phips logbook in a London library that gives the ship's exact location. In addition, all six divers will use hand-held magnetometers to locate the Conception's cannons, which had been pushed overboard long before she sank. Weber said he expected to find her in 30 to 50 feet of water covered by a 6-to-8 foot living coral reef.

(Webber was home in Annville, Pa., in time for Christmas, celebrating his discovery of the Conception. Pieces of eight minted in 1638, 1639 and 1640 helped to validate the wreck. The remains of the ship are scattered about the coral reef, and Webber said he expected salvage efforts to take several months).

AFTER NEARLY 500 years of political chaos and revolution, the Dominican Republic is gearing up for the tourist trade. Rich in New World history and Spanish influence and with a tropical climate of 80 degrees year around, the country is also considered inexpensive by Caribbean standards.

A worker's daily wage can be as low as \$2.50, and a live-in maid costs \$30 per month. Accommodations range from beach huts to splendid spas with casinos and nightclubs, but once you leave the capital of Santo Domingo, unless you are a member of a tour or guest at a resort, you're on your own.

The Dominican government and the World Bank developed a resort near Puerto Plata. An international airport has been completed, and they are working on building some hotels.

Petroleum poor, the country is subject to blackouts, but the people are relaxed about it. Candles in restaurants help light up the night.

Driving anyplace can be an erratic and hair-raising experience. Hand signals are thrown from both sides of the vehicles to indicate turns or change of lane. Crosses dot both sides of the highway, indicating the spots where other people have died.

Cockfights and baseball are favorite national pastimes. And the Dominican Republic is also home to the 24-hour divorce.

The people are friendly, the service is excellent, so is the fruit, fish, and coffee. The rate of exchange (subject to change) is one peso equals one dollar, but the black-market flourishes. Flora and fauna abound.

The Dominican Republic is also easy to get to. Flying time is about 3 hours from New York City. In order to catch the Dominican mood immediately, fly the national airline, Dominicana, where passengers cheer during takeoffs and landings, or else they prey.

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