



Traveletter

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Visit us at our website: www.StCroixHiking.org

2007 Trip: DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

BOASTING of having the highest mountain peak in the Antilles – along with beautiful mountain ranges, valleys, rivers, diverse biospheres, abundant agriculture and mineral resources, rich history and Spanish Caribbean culture, and beaches...the Dominican Republic was an intriguing destination for the 2007 Annual Off Island Trip. So, it is no surprise that many members wanted to go and that we had the largest number of persons...forty three...travelling together.

Most of the group had set their sights on climbing to the top of Pico Duarte which was over 10,000 feet above sea level. They had spent months getting in shape and putting together the gear needed for high altitude backpacking. Anxiously they set out the next day after we arrived at Rancho Wendy. The rest of the group was happy staying below 3000 feet hiking the not so lofty - but steep - verdant mountains which rose up around the valley. They swam, rafted the river, relaxed and waited for the others.

Everyone cheered when the climbers arrived back at the Rancho three days later. They were exhausted and sore but jubilant. The next day they soaked in cool pools fed by waterfalls. Together we took sightseeing bus excursions to Santo Domingo, Puerto Plata, and Santiago. There were frequent trips to Bonao where there was an arts center, shopping, and a very good restaurant. We frequented the little bodegas in the village of Los Quedamos buying snacks, local juices, and Presidente beer. Many of us danced *meringue* and *bachata* into the night with the friends we had made in the village. When it came time to leave it was hard to say "adios".



PHOTO: Front Row: Nycole Thompson, Henry Harris, Laverne Fredericksen, Justina Joseph, Raymond Hector, Esther Sweeney, Robert Rios, Tom Zimmerman. **First standing row:** Celina Santana, Carolyn Merritt, Sonia Maynard-John, Dorothy Flash, Joseph Baker, Linda McIntosh, Roy Panchoo, Tony Elliott, Rita Bannister, Myrtle Pemberton, Kiwan John, Annette Gereau, Jose Rivera, Joyce Nix. **Standing back row:** Michael Mongeau, Fred Flint, Onaldo Pedro, Cathy Prince, Joe Prince, Doreen James, Albion Thomas, Azyza Shabazz, Karl Knight, Ivan Butcher II, Isidore Griles, Raymond Harley, Jennifer Huppiller, Olasee Davis, Nick Drayton, Ira Schullterbandt, Elizabeth O'Reilly, Brad Chaffee **Not pictured:** Julie Bederman, Theresa Collington, Joyce Francis,



‘WE MADE HISTORY’

By Olasee Davis

The St. Croix Hiking Association was off again on its annual trek in the Caribbean. This time, the members decided on the Dominican Republic. The goal was to make history by climbing the highest mountain in the Caribbean.

From where we stayed at Rancho Wendy, near Bona, we drove over three hours to Bermudez National Park. At the beginning of the trail, there were men known as mulateers who loaded our supplies and gear upon the mules' backs. It took us two days and nights to get to the summit of Pico Duarte, which is 10,197 feet above sea level, and one day to descend.

Pico Duarte is part of the mountain chain of the Cordillera Central region which houses two huge national wilderness area parks. On the first day, we crossed one of twelve rivers in the region and hiked over 4,000 feet. That night, we stayed at Los Tablones, one of two shelters on the trail. As some hikers tried to swim at the nearby river, the water was not welcoming with temperatures ranging from 45 to 50 degrees.

That afternoon we cooked, ate, and explored the area. At night, we had a large camp fire and listened to 'jumbie' stories by an elder hiker. While most hikers slept inside the shelter with sleeping bags, some of us decided to tough it out by sleeping outside near the camp fire - under the dark sky with bright stars. To our surprise, the temperature dropped below 50. If we didn't have sleeping bags, our butts would have been frozen.

Before sunrise, we had breakfast and the mules were loaded again to carry our supplies up the mountain. We crossed the river again for the third time knowing nothing of how the day would turn out. The landscape of the mountain region was dominated by tropical pine trees with ferns and mosses carpeting the forest floor. As we climbed higher the air changed. Some hikers' feet began to give away with pain as we climbed steeper trails at ever higher altitudes.

One individual got mountain sickness. Sweat dripped like water falling from the sky from the body of a hiker. This person was dehydrated. Others staggered up the mountain trails like drunken people. We stopped several times to rest.

It helped. Then, again, it seemed not to make much difference when your body feels totally "mash up." As things got tougher for some hikers, ambulance mules were provided for them to ride on. Dr. Carolyn Merritt, a member of the Hiking Association, also aided the hikers by administering medicine for altitude sickness. Like many of us, some mules were also tired from carrying large load on their backs.

Nonetheless, before night fall, we arrived at the second shelter on the trail. Everyone got something to eat and turned in for the night. At this point, we were at about 7,000 feet in elevation with night temperatures in the 30's.

Around 4:00 am, a small group with flashlights started the final assault on the summit of Pico Duarte. The peak is marked with the statue of Duarte and the Dominican Republic flag. We held up the Virgin Islands flag and took pictures. And yes, the hike was worth every pain, sore butt, and bruise, especially for Jose Rivera who made the summit in his seventies.

Other activities on the trip were whitewater kayaking on the river, enjoying waterfalls, hiking the Indian trail, meeting locals, touring museums and shopping in Santa Domingo, Puerto Plata, and Santiago. What can I say? It was an awesome trip!

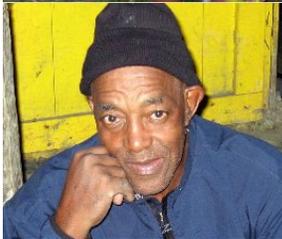


Photos:

Above left at the Summit: Cathy Prince, Olasee Davis, Julie Beberman, Karl Knight, Joe Prince, Joyce Francis, Henry Harris, and Robert Rios.

Lower left: Olasee Davis, ecologist and author.

Lower right: : Dr. Carolyn Merritt and Jose Rivera - over 70 years old and the 2007 Male Hiker of the Year.



“MY BODY AIN’T ABLE” by Nycole Thompson

My experience hiking Pico Duarte brings to mind an expression my St. Thomian grandmother would often say: "My body ain't able." Over the course of the two days that we hiked up the mountain, I experienced fatigue but I felt proud that I was one of a few hikers who ascended the mountain carrying their packs the entire way. On the third day, we rose early to ascend the peak. It was completely dark, except for the campfire, our flashlights, and the stars in the sky. The guide, who was riding a mule, led us out of the campsite. We walked behind him in one long line on the trail, which eventually separated into two groups. I was the last in the line of the first group. The distance between the groups grew. When the person walking behind the guide stopped to rest, the rest of us stopped, too. The guide kept going and the distance between us grew. I said that the resting hiker could continue hiking when the second group caught up to her. We left her and caught up to the guide.



Above: Nycole Thompson, Myrtle Pemberton, and Ivan Butcher II

After a while, I started feeling light-headed. I began to stumble. I knew it was altitude sickness because I had experienced it years ago in Bolivia. I couldn't believe it was happening to me again, because I had been taking medication to prevent it. I tried to ignore it and but I began to feel worse. I felt faint. Yet I didn't tell the hikers in front of me that I was ill. I struggled to keep up with the pace of the group but I started lagging behind. I began to stagger. I willed my body not to stop but my body just wasn't able. I quietly collapsed into the bush on the side of the trail. The hikers in front of me didn't realize that I had fallen behind. I felt helpless. Pride kept me from calling out to them. I felt embarrassed by my body's weakness. After having pressed on without the hiker who had stopped to rest, I could hardly slow down the group on my behalf!

After a while, I couldn't see the hikers anymore. I could only see their flashlights. It was an eerie experience, watching the distance between us grow; knowing I didn't have the strength to continue. I knew the second group would catch up to me. Yet I still felt vulnerable, laying there in the quiet darkness before dawn. I thought of the news stories I'd heard about hikers who lost their lives because they'd gotten lost or were injured as a result of treacherous hiking conditions. Experiencing the physical limitations of my own body, I thought of my own mortality.

Suddenly, I heard my name and I came out of my reverie. The hikers had realized I was no longer with them. I said that I'd continue hiking with the second group when they caught up to me. After a while, I made a determination to catch up with my group. My strategy was to keep the flashlights within my sight and follow the lights until I caught up with the group. I got up and walked no more than a few yards before I fell ill again. I collapsed into the bush on the side of the trail. I felt demoralized. After a while, I got up to walk again. When illness struck me, I didn't fight it; I just sank into the bushes to give my body time to recover. The flashlights of my group were getting dimmer and I heard the voices of the hikers in the second group in the distance behind me, as they drew nearer. Still determined to catch up to my group, I got up again. I went through the routine of "walking-feeling ill-resting-and getting back up to walk" a number of times before I finally caught up with my group. By then the sun had come up. It was a bright new day! When I later read an article about high altitude, I realized that continuing to ascend the peak while I was suffering from altitude sickness was unsound. Ignorance was bliss on Pico Duarte!



Photos - Left: Juan Pablo Duarte, one of the founding fathers, and his new girl friend Myrtle Pemberton. Center: Karl Knight. Right: Jennifer Huppeler.

Why Do We Do It? by Ivan Butcher II

THIS is a question that each one of us struggles with on each of these adventures. Joyce Francis has two expressions that are my favorites: "I don't want to play hiking any more". Her other one is: "Imagine, I asked and paid to come on this hike".

THE 2007 hiking trip to the Dominican Republic was the most demanding and humbling one for me. The mantra is usually: "Are we there yet?" On this hike it was: "How much further?" This year's challenge was a three day hike. We climbed and slept two nights on the mountain, and took a day to descend. It was 46 miles round trip. It is said that half of the people that try to reach the top never make it.

FROM the very beginning things were not right. When we got to the Rancho where we were staying, we were told that the hike was moved up a day. This meant that the next morning we were to begin the three days hike. I was counting on a day to eat and rest. The morning we left St. Croix we had to be to the airport at 5 am so I'd gotten little sleep. That evening at the ranch, the food was terrible and I ate very little.

THE first day we trekked for about 2 hours to an altitude of 4,700 feet. and to the area of the first campsite. Again that evening, the food - canned ravioli & cheese and spaghetti & meatballs - was not what I eat. They had only three cans of tuna fish, for the non- meat eaters. So, I had a dry tuna sandwich. The night was cold and I didn't get any sleep on the hard concert floor. I tossed and turned the whole night. Breakfast was more of the same.

SO being hungry and tired, one hour into the second day I broke down. Exhausted, sweating profusely, I began suffering from dehydration and began having severe cramps in my inner thighs. Because, I have felt much worse, I knew I just had to rest a little and slow down until I caught myself. When I looked into the eyes of the others, from their reflection I knew they felt I was in serious trouble. The group thought that I was finished. They almost demanded that I ride the ambulance mule. My response was, "I didn't come to ride a mule." My first thought was that my life had always been a struggle so this was just another day. One step at a time I struggled for 9.5 hours to reach the campsite. Surprisingly enough I was only 45 minutes behind the last ones in the group. I knew that there was no way for me to really prepare for all the effects of the altitude when on St. Croix, but I was conditioned for the distance. The fact is, if I hadn't been in excellent shape, I would not have made it to the campsite - nor would I have been able to even walk the next day.

THAT evening, I got a good meal of beans and rice, and a decent amount of rest and sleep. The next morning, we rose at 3am and set out an hour later to reach the peak at 6:30am...before the clouds set in just after sunrise. Despite my concerns and to everyone's surprise I was in the first group to reach the 10,100+ ft. peak. The weather couldn't have been better. In fact this is our first hike to a peak that we were not rained on or covered by clouds with little or no visibility. The view was literally breath taking. If it had rained at anytime, this would have been literally the most horrible experience: cold, wet, muddy with slippery rocks and drop-offs, not to mention the added physical challenge.

SO, the third day, having hiked three and half hours to the peak and back, we packed up and hiked - in one day - what we had done in two days, from 8am to 7pm - a total of 14.5 hours. I had no problems on the way back, and we were blessed that it didn't rain. Sometimes on our hikes it would be pouring rain. On most of our hikes I stay in the back helping and encouraging others when they are having difficulty: now, I can totally empathize with 'struggle'. It was my 'spirit' that dragged my body up that mountain aided by the support and encouragement of the four others who stayed behind with me.

Two impressions stand out in my memory. The first was the forest landscape above 3,000 feet. On most peaks we have climbed the vegetation is short scrub. This was different with moss covered rocks, ferns, and exotic looking pine trees. The second was the night sky lit up by the stars. It looked as if you could pluck them from the sky, they seemed so close. Oh! And I have gained respect for mules...and to think that they worked our ancestors like animals.

WHY do we do it? I cannot speak for the others, but for me: it is the adventure, the beauty, the challenge, the experience...**THE UNKNOWN**. Would I do it again? **YES!!**

Fred Flint Reflects



The Presidente Suite

We rolled into Rancho Wendy, unloaded our luggage and were milling around checking out our surroundings. I was impatient to get unpacked, so I got Victorlicio to show me my room. Brad and I had been assigned a room next to the stream, not far from the games area. Victorlicio let me in, I checked it out, brought in my suitcase and backpack and gave him a twenty to stock the refrigerator. It wasn't bad at all. Brad and I each had a full size bunk bed to ourselves. His had a built in mosquito net. The dorm sized fridge soon was full of Presidente. The toilet had a seat, the shower a nozzle. There was a "Persian rug" on the floor.

I ventured out to break the good news to those hanging around the games area: the rooms aren't bad; come see. A few did, but most had set off to find their own rooms. A while later, the word started to come back about the poor girls' rooms: three girls to 1 ½ beds; no toilet seat; no shower heads; bugs and rats and cooties. I felt terrible. People started coming over to look at the Presidente Suite and I felt so guilty. My mind was racing, thinking of ways to work out some kind of accommodation for the poor girls who were assigned to squalor. I was just ready to speak, when she said, "Fred, don't even think about it". So, Brad and I lived in the luxury of the Presidente Suite all week.

Sleeping

After hearing Carolyn's horror story of rats in the ceiling, I was a little hesitant about the top bunk, up near the straw laced rafters. I opened my sleeping bag and threw it on top of the covers and flopped on top of it, belly down.

Better than the critters being one foot above my face. We had a fan and the electricity was on, so sleep came quickly. Sometime in the wee hours I awoke to the long lost sound of the convulsing digestive rebellion often heard in college dorms and fraternities. It was so close; I leaned to the edge of the bed to see if Brad was accounted for. He was sleeping right through this New York City traffic jam. Who could it be? Henry and

his buddies were in one adjacent room; Ivan, Tom and Mike in another. I tried to recognize the voice; it didn't work. It sounded too burly for Henry. I thought it might be Rios. The rest of us had barely had the chance to drink; who knows how he spent his day? It went on for an hour. As it turned out, Tony wouldn't need to do any sit ups, his stomach had been fully toned that night.

Travel

We knew that climbing Pico Duarte would be a challenge, but as it turned out just getting to the Dominican Republic was just as daunting. Ask Sonia and Kiwan. Half the week spent in San Juan? Was that on the itinerary? I didn't see it. So, as it somehow happens in the Caribbean, Sonia and Kiwan were stranded in the name of National Security. They were OK to leave St. Croix and enter San Juan... but leaving San Juan for Santiago, DR presented such a threat to world security that Kiwan was detained in San Juan from Saturday until Wednesday when just the right Customs Agent came on duty. Fortunately (or maybe not) they finally made it to Rancho Wendy. 'Unfortunately' they missed Pico Duarte. Don't worry, be happy!

It's a good thing Rios was the last one to show up for our flight leaving St. Croix. We'd reserved chartered seats on AA Eagle MONTHS ahead of time. They still overbooked and bounced us. Who else could've negotiated the ONLY other flight to D.R. that day PLUS a five hour cab ride from La Romana to Los Quedamos, only to arrive to "cheers, skol, and salut" after midnight and still get up at 5 AM to meet the challenge of Pico Duarte? No one, but Robert Rios!

I'm glad he made it. Not because he squeezed his hairy, bulky body in between Karl and I at the campsite at La Comparticion at the last minute, but because he stretched, jostled and jockeyed all night, crowding me against the pretty girl on my other side. Believe me, I did not wake up facing Robert's hairy mug that morning.



La Comparticion Campsite

Sanitation??

We had no idea what we were in for. After a four hour bus ride, partly along the edge of thousand foot drops on washed out roads, we arrived at the base of the Pico Duarte trail. The sight of outhouses was a welcome sight, although I was glad to be male and surrounded by woods. Many of the women grudgingly used the facilities. Only later would we learn to appreciate outhouses that had doors - particularly ones that could be closed.

A short 75 minute hike later we arrived at Los Tablones, where we would spend the afternoon and night. An all day respite before we even started seemed like poor planning, but Los Tablones did offer a chance to bathe. The 55° mountain stream was very refreshing. I was impressed by the number of people who enjoyed the swimming hole, especially the Cruzans! Oh, and the outhouses had doors, but you had to hold them shut. The next day, many hours into the Pico Duarte hike, the whole concept of sanitation, or lack thereof, and the consequences struck me. On the first day at Rancho Wendy I had jumped into the stream to cool down. The local children were in there swimming, so it must be okay, right? Now I remember noticing the pots getting washed in the stream after meals. Days later, hiking up in the surrounding mountains on the Indian Trail, and then walking around town, it came to me where the sewage went. Well, the local Dominicans' intestinal systems had adapted to these conditions over the years. Mine had not.

Survival

The Pico Duarte hike was the most physically challenging thing I've ever done. College football? Patooy! Triathlons? Pssst! Pico Duarte was 'the real thing'! We had trained with Ivan for six months. We did plenty of Beast climbs at an impressive pace. We hiked the whole Scenic Drive in seven hours with packs. We were ready!

And then, at 6,000 feet, it happened! Of all people, IVAN, caved. His eyes expressed complete nonsense.

I could not believe it! He would not quit! And who could blame him? Carolyn came back and gave us some altitude sickness pills. Hector and Joyce stayed back with Ivan to provide support. We got Gatorade into him, and ¼ of an energy bar. Walk 10 minutes; rest 10 minutes. This went on for an hour or more. Eventually he came back to life like a desert flower after rain. And then Raymond wilted. I was amazed that we made it to the campsite at La Comparticion only one hour after everyone else. As it turned out, everything and everyone were fine. That night, totally beat from our eleven hour hike, lack of real food and sparse sleep we enjoyed the luxury of bathing with 50° water coming out of a 2" pipe from the side of the mountain. Don't ask me how or why, but I shaved with this liquid ice! The next morning we saw the sunrise en route to the peak of Duarte.

Perspective

Believe it or not, 'Rancho' Wendy proved truly luxurious upon our return from Pico Duarte!



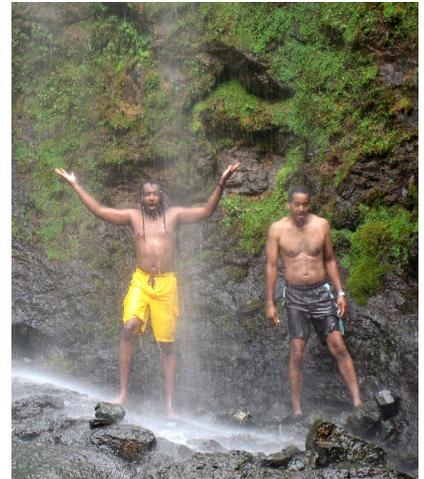
The Pool Deck at Rancho Wendy



Taking advantage of the 'dude' rancho shuttle: (left to right) Doreen James, Joyce Nix, Isidore Griles, Justina Joseph, Linda McIntosh, and Elizabeth O'Reilly



Faces & Places of DR



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