

# *The Top of the Caribbean...Climbing Pico Duarte*

by Marcie Connelly-Lynn

Arriving in cruiser-friendly Luperon, Dominican Republic after eight weeks in the dry Bahamas, David and I yearned to explore the interior of this lush, green island. After a few days at anchor, we decided where better to start than at the top.

Arrangements were easily made at the Luperon marina to watch the boat and take care of the ship's cat while we escaped for a five-day trip to climb Pico Duarte. Our host and guide, Dimi, met us at the marina in his "safari" truck, a 4-wheel drive vehicle with only two working gears and no speedometer, and off we went.

Pico Duarte, at 10,032 feet (3,087M), is the highest peak in the Caribbean. Located in the Armando Bermudez National Park in the central region of the Dominican Republic, the mountain is part of their National Park System and a protected area. The tiny village of La Ciénaga is the base camp for the mountain and about four hours away from Luperon by truck. We traveled a couple of hours via highways, but the final leg was a very rough, dirt road and finally a narrow, poorly maintained log bridge into the village. We arrived slightly shaken (but not stirred).



A thatched-roof casita provided the first night's lodging

Our first night at the base camp we opted to stay in a small, but private thatched *casita* rather than the larger dormitory-style facility. The amenities here

included toilets (no toilet seats or paper) and potable water from a spigot. Our hut had a cement floor. We brought air mattresses (only one held air for an entire night...glad it was mine!) and two blankets. After sweating through each night on the boat in Luperon, we found the temperature at base camp, in the high 50s, very cool and refreshing. We ended up pinning the two blankets together to make a double sleeping bag sort of arrangement.

We rose by 7am the next morning, had breakfast and were introduced to our local guide (a requirement for climbing the mountain) and three other local people who would cook, tend the mules and be our companions for the next three days. Seven people, two heavily laden pack mules, four riding mules and we were off to climb a mountain.



Thankfully, we stopped every now and then for a break.

The trail to the top is about 24km and we hiked all but 5km on the first day in anticipation of reaching the summit bright and early the next morning. The area has three rivers, just deep enough to get your feet wet while riding mules, and we crossed them all. In general, the mules were sure-footed, even when it rained (and it rained frequently). The steep, rutted trails became deep and thick with slippery yellow mud. Riding along the trail single file, taking in the natural beauty and awe-inspiring views was enjoyable as well as contemplative. The *mulos*, however, needed constant encouragement, and there was seldom a quiet moment with the guides constantly shouting, cajoling, whistling and

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clucking to urge them on.

Thankfully we stopped twice for breaks at designated rest stops. After riding the mules for several hours, it was wonderful to rest, but difficult to dismount and walk. Remounting for the next leg of the trip was even more difficult as our tender boat butts were not at all used to the saddles. David opted to walk for a while, if only to give his hemorrhoids a rest!

The views were stunning throughout the trip. The forests are lush and green with oversize ferns and elephant ears, reminiscent of Jurassic Park, which was filmed in this area. Tiny, delicate orchids lined the trail and brightly colored butterflies and birds were everywhere. In some spots, it wouldn't have surprised us at all to see a dinosaur appear on our path. Actually, being an arachnaphobe, I would have preferred a dinosaur to the tarantulas we saw.

We ended the first day's journey at La Compartición where we slept for the night. Dimi and "Mama", our diminutive cook, prepared dinner over a huge, smoke-blackened wood stove. Considering the facilities available, we ate gourmet...beef tips and rice with champignons. Rum was the drink of choice. We sat around a huge campfire after dinner, listening to the night sounds and chatting in our limited Spanish with our Dominican companions.

Without electricity, night came early! Our sleeping accommodation was the wooden floor of a casita used by all. We cordoned off a small area for our gear and settled in. We were warned that rats also shared the facilities and heard them scurrying during the night...no close encounters, however. The night went from cool to very, very cold (30's). We went to bed fully clothed and snuggled up. We could see our breath in the night air.

Around 5am, we were given a cup of hot chocolate to fortify ourselves and set back upon our mules again for the final climb to the summit. Only

Pedro accompanied us as our guide (he got the short stick, I guess). It was pitch black and David brought up the rear of our trio with a flashlight in hand. "The mules know the way," they said and they did, but it was eerie traveling in the dark. The mules took us as far as Vallecito de Lilis, then we hiked the rest of the way on foot...a bit strenuous, but not particularly difficult. It was misty and foggy on top and quite cold, and just barely light by the time we reached the summit. A bust of Juan Pablo Duarte, father of the country, sits on top along with a cross and the Dominican flag. Due to the fog, our aerial view was very limited, but no matter...we made it!



Summit of Pico Duarte

We were back down from the summit by 8:30 and headed to Valle de Tetero, another campsite. This area is beautiful with large open *campos* and dark purple mountains in the background. The camp setup here was the same except the *casita* was smaller, so we slept in a small utility room on a concrete floor. Dinner was a shish kabob affair served with delicious *maro* (rice, corn and beans). Outhouses were available, but water for washing ourselves and the dishes was found in the nearby river. While at this campsite, we came upon *Piedras Indigenas*...stones carved by the native Tainos hundreds of years ago and left for us to ponder and admire.

Our final trek back to La Ciénaga was a long, long day and it rained constantly. Spanish moss hung from the trees and after a shower with a gray sky

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above, it provided a supernatural look to the dense foliage as we rode through.



Spanish moss lends a supernatural air to our surroundings.

I grimaced a time or two as pieces of dangling moss brushed against my face, worrying that the ever-present insects and other critters might be attached to the moss, but my luck held out. We wore foul weather jackets over jeans, but were soaked through and caked with yellow mud from head to toe by the time we arrived at the base camp. Tired, drenched, muddy and totally exhilarated.

Including the side trip we took to Tetero, we traveled about 63 km roundtrip on mules. (I fell off the mule only once.) I must note that as we were descending the last day, a young German hiker passed us. She had been up and down in the same day in the rain without a mule...and she wasn't even breathing hard. On the other hand, we believe we hold the record for the *slowest* ascent of Pico Duarte by a middle-aged couple, but then who's to argue?