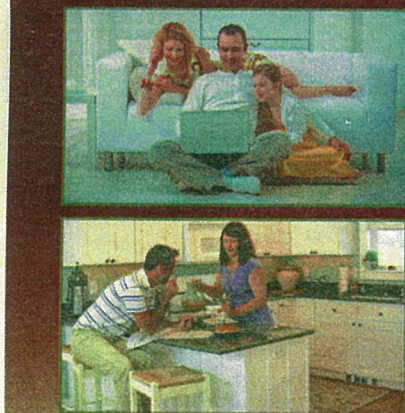


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Great Escape



Barahona at dawn

Late for the Party in the Dominican Republic

Story and Photography by Lisa K. Harris

A lounge chair nestled beneath a swaying palm tree and umbrella-clad drinks close by are enticements that beckon many to the Dominican Republic. However, it was a Carnival mask that my two daughters and I were seeking. Because we had arrived in June—well past the Caribbean island's month-long February street party—I knew that our search could be challenging.

Our adventure began the moment I pulled our rental SUV out from Santo Domingo's airport onto the highway. Motorcycles and trucks brimming with plantain stalks, and vans overflowing with people zipped by, paying no heed to lane markers or merging traffic.

Swerving to miss an axle-breaking pothole and ignoring my younger daughter's shout, I stowed my expectations of traffic signs, mile markers and what guidebooks refer to as "tourist amenities" and made note of the fuel gauge. With few exits and none marked, I didn't want to be caught short.

After leaving the city that Columbus founded when he dropped anchor in the New World, we whizzed along the island's southern coast, heading to the Baoruca Peninsula with its natural parks, sugar cane plantations and larium mines. Short on palm trees and white sand beaches, the peninsula is arid, with cacti, thorny scrub, scrawny trees and rocky shores. We stayed in Barahona, the area's main town (known for its carnival parades), at a 12-room inn. With the exception of two stray cats, we were the only guests. At night the clerk slept in the courtyard outside

our room, trussed in a hammock, with a machete and cell phone close by.

We visited the remote Parque Nacional Jaragua, near the Haitian border. Not accustomed to visitors, children scrambled around us as we walked to the end of a rickety pier and ungracefully stepped into a small boat. With guide Manuelo at the engine's throttle, we swooshed across brackish Lake Oviedo, the air reeking of rotten eggs from the water's high sulfur content.

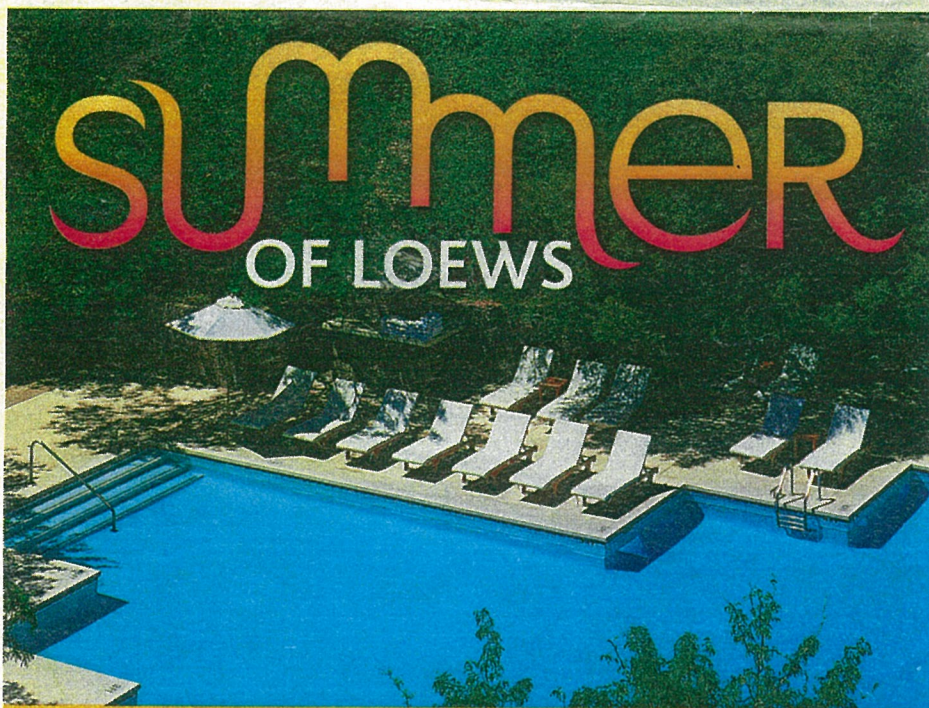
Approaching a cay that separated the lake from the ocean, Manuelo cut the motor and we drifted into reedy shallows. Holding our sandals overhead, we trudged through waist-high water to shore. Pink flamingos, ibis and frigate birds watched our progress. Birds, endangered rhinoceros iguanas and pictographs by pre-Columbus-era Taíno Indians are the park's draw, and



Jimenoa Falls in Jaraboca

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Bilbi and the carnival mask he created

we encountered plenty of them hiking through the cay's mangroves and heavenly scented frangipani trees.

In Barahona, I searched for a mask, but my questions were met with head shakes and referrals to yet another variety store or park, where one apron-clad woman selling homemade wine and grape bunches said, "Only in February."

After a dip in icy natural pools at the edge of the sea and a shopping spree for blue larimar stones at a ramshackle hut on a hillside, we retraced our highway miles. Back in Santo Domingo we tacked north and drove to mountainous Jarabocoa, arriving in darkness. Luckily, the twisty roads were easier to navigate than those in the peninsula as the cooler hills are a popular destination for escaping the coastal heat

Jarabocoa, the Taíno word for "place of abundant waters," delivered. Eventually, after many inquiries, including turning down an offer to buy a gold, white and red satin carnival outfit choked full of ruffles, luminescent sequins and colorful tassels that would have made a Las Vegas showgirl drool, we found Bilbi, an artist.

He lived in a hand-hewn house near the fortress-like main cathedral of the nearby town of La Vega. The electricity had been out for hours and his home was sweltering hot. Among tables cluttered with paint, knives and papers, and a human skeleton hanging on the wall, he agreed to make a mask if we'd give him five days and a deposit.

While Bilbi crafted, we spent the days exploring.

We hiked to Jimenoa Falls, a 200-foot cascade featured in the movie Jurassic Park. The trail was so steep and twisty we hauled ourselves up with rope-like ficus tree roots. Thunder crashed and we scurried up the hill in a downpour, the rain making the

trail a slip-slidey mess. We rode horses along the Yaque River, past cock fighting rings with flamboyantly feathered roosters.

Touring a coffee roasting cooperative, we watched women pluck stones from a conveyor belt laden with beans, their wages determined by the weight of debris they removed.

Eventually, Bilbi met us on his veranda, holding a huge yellow-faced mask with silver horns, red lips and nasty jagged teeth. For hair, he'd added swirly pink, blue and yellow-dyed ostrich feathers.

"It's a bit girly," my teenage daughter said of the latest addition to our collection.

What else would a carnival mask artist create when three girls showed up four months late to the party? I nestled the mask in the backseat before we headed to a beach town on the opposite side of the island where we planned to hunt for lounge chairs under swaying palm trees.

DL

Lisa K. Harris is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.

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