

Dominican Republic Mission Trip - Lessons Learned

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta Georgia

May 21, 2014

1. **SERVANT HEARTS** We go to the Dominican Republic to be with our friends and fellow church members, and to work with them for a week as best we can. We hope that we can be good servants and good guests, and we would like to be invited to return again. Our mission team has used this motto on our t-shirts for several years: "One God, One Church, One Mission!" The motto of the Episcopal Diocese of the Dominican Republic from Isaiah 43:10-11 is also good to keep in mind during the mission trip: "Ustedes son mis testigos." The complete passage in English is as follows: "You are my witnesses," says the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me."
2. **WATER** In general, tap water in the Dominican Republic cannot be considered safe to drink. The only safe drinkable water is bottled water, both in individual serving bottles and in large dispenser bottles. Caution should be used while brushing teeth and taking personal medications to have bottled water on hand.
3. **WATER BOTTLE** Each missionary should have a personal water bottle to refill from approved water sources as often as is needed. The Episcopal camp will have an abundant supply of bottled water available in a large dispenser from which we will fill personal water bottles.
4. **ELECTICAL POWER** The Dominican Republic uses the same power voltage and electrical outlets as the United States. No transformers are needed. Electrical power outages are fairly common, sometimes once daily for several hours at a time. A dependable flashlight is handy during outages at night when walking outside or trying to locate an item inside a dark room.
5. **FLASHY JEWELRY AND ELECTRONICS** Flashy items in these categories may attract unwanted attention and thus need to be secured at all times. If you don't absolutely need it, consider not bringing it.
6. **PASSPORTS** Keep your passport secure at all times during the trip. You will need it to enter the Dominican Republic, to check into the hotel in Santo Domingo, to leave the Dominican Republic, and to re-enter the United States. It takes a great deal of time and effort to replace a missing passport while abroad, even on an emergency basis. During our June 2014 trip, the US Embassy in Santo Domingo will be moving to a new location and will be closed for several days, further complicating any replacement effort.

7. **BAGGAGE CLAIM CHECK** The staff members in the Santo Domingo airport perform a rigorous check of baggage just before exiting the baggage claim area to make sure that your bags have tags that match the baggage claim receipt on your travel documents. These baggage claim receipts are usually attached to your boarding pass when you check in at the Orlando airport. Since we will be traveling with several identical black duffle bags in addition to personal baggage, each duffle bag has to be matched up with the person who checked it in before we exit the baggage claim area. The duffle bags will have a tag with each person's name on it to help with this process. We will also be placing "flagging tape" in the same colors on all checked luggage, both personal and supplies, to make it easier to spot all of our team baggage on the luggage carousel.
8. **SELF-SUFFICIENCY** Pack whatever is needed for the duration of the mission trip. Do not anticipate having an opportunity to purchase a needed item in the Dominican Republic. Although a great variety of shopping opportunities are available, transportation to those locations and the time required for the trip are often not readily available.
9. **INSECT REPELLENT** There are several mosquito-borne illnesses in the Dominican Republic. Although clouds of mosquitoes do not infest our mission team location, they are present, particularly at night or during times of no wind. Bring an appropriate insect repellent and use it frequently. Spiders and small crawling insects may be present in dormitory rooms or bathrooms, so appropriate sprays may be useful in these locations.
10. **HOT WATER** Hot water may or may not be available in our living quarters. If it is not available, let your team leader know. It may be that this condition can be fixed; but then again, it may not be, or at least not right away.
11. **DRINKING ALCOHOL** Members of our mission teams have traditionally refrained from drinking alcohol while at the Campamento in El Pedregal. Beer and wine are available in the restaurant in Santo Domingo on Saturday night and also at a local sidewalk café down the street from our hotel.
12. **REQUESTS FOR CHARITY** Listen politely, but do not respond to requests from individuals for charity or other assistance. At our work site, the priest is in charge of charity for members of the local church and other village residents. If you are approached by anyone with a request for charity, let your team leader know.
13. **FLEXIBILITY** Be flexible in terms of the daily plans during the mission trip. Often conditions change rapidly, and the team has to adjust accordingly.

14. **BE AWARE OF TIME** The team will eat meals together as a group, and will have other meetings that need the participation of everyone. Often the days and evenings are tightly scheduled in terms of work periods, meals, meetings, group devotionals, and recreation. Since most people will not have a working cell phone, it is impossible to call to locate someone who is not present, and we do not want to begin until everyone is present.
15. **DO NOT GO ALONE** In general, our work site in El Pedregal is quite safe. However, it is good practice not to walk anywhere in the village alone and out of sight of other team members or Dominicans who are part of the church community. In the event someone has to go somewhere alone outside of the Campamento's fenced area, it is a good practice to let other team members know about it ahead of time. Within the fenced area of the Campamento is considered to be a safe area. Often individual team members will take some time to sit apart inside that area to write in a journal, pray or meditate.
16. **TOILETS** Dominican toilet and septic systems are not designed to flush toilet paper. There will be a small trash can next to each toilet. Used toilet paper is to be placed in this trash can. If the used toilet paper is especially soiled, some people like to place it inside a small ziplock bag and then place the ziplock bag in the trash can.
17. **STAYING TOGETHER** There are times during the trip where the entire mission team needs to stay together as a group, including transiting airports. While in airports, the team members wear identical colored t-shirts to help stay together and to facilitate passage through security and other checkpoints.
18. **PEANUT BUTTER AND SNACKS** Some team members like to bring jars of peanut butter as a "back-up" item for meals. Another common practice is to bring assorted snack foods and pool them in a common place in the team dormitory for all to share at snack time. If you do bring peanut butter, remember that it must be in your checked baggage and not in your carry-on bag. TSA considers peanut butter to be a "liquid" and restricts it in carry-ons accordingly.
19. **STURDY SHOES** Dominican construction sites can be quite rough in terms of broken concrete, loose wires, pieces of metal, and splinters of wood. Anyone entering a construction site needs to wear appropriately sturdy shoes.
20. **UNCOOKED FOODS** In general, it is not safe to eat uncooked foods such as salad greens, sliced fruits, and tomatoes since they may have come into contact with unsafe water. All types of food served at the Episcopal camp will be safe to eat, but these uncooked foods should be avoided in street vendor stalls and restaurants.

21. **SOCIAL MEDIA** Many Dominicans are heavy users of social media sites such as Facebook, and often ask to become Facebook friends. More and more individuals have access to smartphones and use Facebook and email in mobile settings. Any posts of texts or photos on your own Facebook page or a group Facebook page should be done with the awareness that these posts can be seen by your contacts in the Dominican Republic, and also shared by them with others.
22. **LEAVING CLOTHING BEHIND** Some team members like to leave extra clothes, sheets and pillowcases behind in the dormitory when they leave. Often team members will wear loose-fitting clothing items in the medical “scrubs” category during the trip, but will leave them behind on the last day. The camp staff will collect these items after we leave. Under the supervision of the priest, they will be distributed to those in need in the village. Do not give clothing directly to individuals in the village.
23. **PHOTOGRAPHS** A team photographer will be working to take photographs all during the trip to compile a chronicle of the entire week that will be made available to all team members about two weeks after the team returns home. This compilation will also be posted online and linked to the website of Christ Episcopal Church (<http://www.christchurchvaldosta.org>). If other team members wish to contribute their photographs to this compilation project, those camera cards will be collected on the last day of the trip so that the image files can be copied and considered for inclusion during the compilation editing process. Photographs on smartphones may be emailed to this address after returning to the United States: jariail@bellsouth.net

This is a working “lessons learned” document for the June 2014 mission trip sponsored by Christ Episcopal Church (Valdosta GA). Suggestions for additions or revisions are welcome for use in other mission trips. Those suggestions may be sent to Julius Ariail (jariail@bellsouth.net).