

Advertising Feature

PASSPORT to

DISCOVERY

'No more beautiful island in the world'

BY BART CARD

Contributing Travel Editor

As I stood in the middle of a Dominican Republic cigar factory, on the outskirts of Santiago with the smell of tobacco wafting off the sun-drenched walls, I intently watched a young man going about his work. Swiftly rolling and folding a cigar in the making, his hands moving fast as he sliced the cigar into its proper size. My eyes were glued to his hands, working to perfection a craft that is honed through generations - from grandfather, to father and son.

Confidently, I figured it couldn't possibly be that difficult and asked the man to teach me. As I first listened to his instructions and then took upon the task, I soon realized I would be no veteran cigar maker that day. I sat for minutes on end. Rolling, folding and cutting. Rolling, folding and cutting.

My biggest problem was the cigar I fashioned just wasn't tight enough. "Too loose," my teacher barked in broken English. "Roll tighter," he commanded. I kept starting from scratch, the tips of my fingers were turning red and my hands began to ache. I did not finish at the top of my class, but I did appreciate the labour of love that was my teacher's profession.

In the end, I decided it was better to step down and walk away, leaving the job to a professional. Instead, I comforted myself by buying a box of 25 Special Selection Cibao cigars - some of the finest in the Dominican Republic.

The Dominican Republic shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti in the Caribbean. With almost eight million residents, it's the most populous country in the Caribbean. When Christopher Columbus saw the island on his first voyage in 1492, he was impressed by its natural beauty, insisting there is no more beautiful island in the world.

The landscape is forested and mountainous, with valleys, plains and plateaus. Excellent beaches can be found on the north, southeast and east coasts. The old parts of the capital, Santo Domingo, have been carefully restored to retain their colonial charm. The modern areas contain a thriving port city, and a few miles east of the city is a remarkable cave complex, Los Tres Ojos de Agua (The Three Eyes of Water), containing three turquoise lagoons, fed by an underground river

and surrounded by stalactites, stalagmites and lush vegetation.

I must admit the Dominican Republic has not been at the top of my personal list of places to visit. As a Bermudian, I figured there wouldn't be much new for me to see. Yet like anything in life, you have to experience things first hand instead of taking the opinions of others. Most tourists go to

go to the beach, slap on the suntan lotion and sit still for hours on end paying worship to the Caribbean sun. If you are, try the Amhsa Marina Hotels and Resorts... operating for years they carry a great reputation and don't forget to check out the windsurfing, some of the best in the world.

But Bart Card is an adventurer. I like to go and explore the countryside.

Italian espresso. It contained a hint of spice that I couldn't identify through the coffee aroma, until she said it was a touch of nutmeg.

Between sips of coffee, we began discussing cigars, and I offered her one of my Cibao's. In turn she presented me with her own variety. After a couple of puffs, she said "not bad." I'll never forget that old lady, the vision of her enjoying a cigar under the Dominican sun and enjoying every second of it.

But there's more to the Dominican Republic than just hot sun, fine cigars and the home-bottled rum. Native Dominican cooking combines Spanish influences with local produce. Local dishes include la bandera (comprising white rice, red beans, stewed meat, salad and fried plantain) and cassava (fried yucca). Locally produced beer and rum is relatively

cheap. The national music, merengue, is celebrated in several festivals that draw large numbers of national and international musicians.

I devoured the best tuna of my lifetime thanks to a little beach-side cafe I stumbled upon. The chef was French, who visited the Dominican, fell in love and stayed on. Today, he adores both his wife and the island. I actually brought the loin of the tuna back to Holland Landing, and after some spices and blackening on the frying pan, it was delicious with a splash of rum and a fine Cibao.

The Dominican Republic is renowned for its large deposits of Amber, and many beautiful pieces of jewelry featuring this yellowish-brown fossil resin. However, watch out for plastic imitations, most jewelers will use fluorescent lights to verify its authenticity. There are also many inexpensive pieces of pottery and earthenware made locally, as well as products made from seashells and coral. But by far the greatest proportion of paintings, woodcarvings and metal work, are produced by the "Artists of the

Caribbean" - the Haitians. You can locate many excellent bargains of numerous original colourful styles of paintings in all tourist centres.

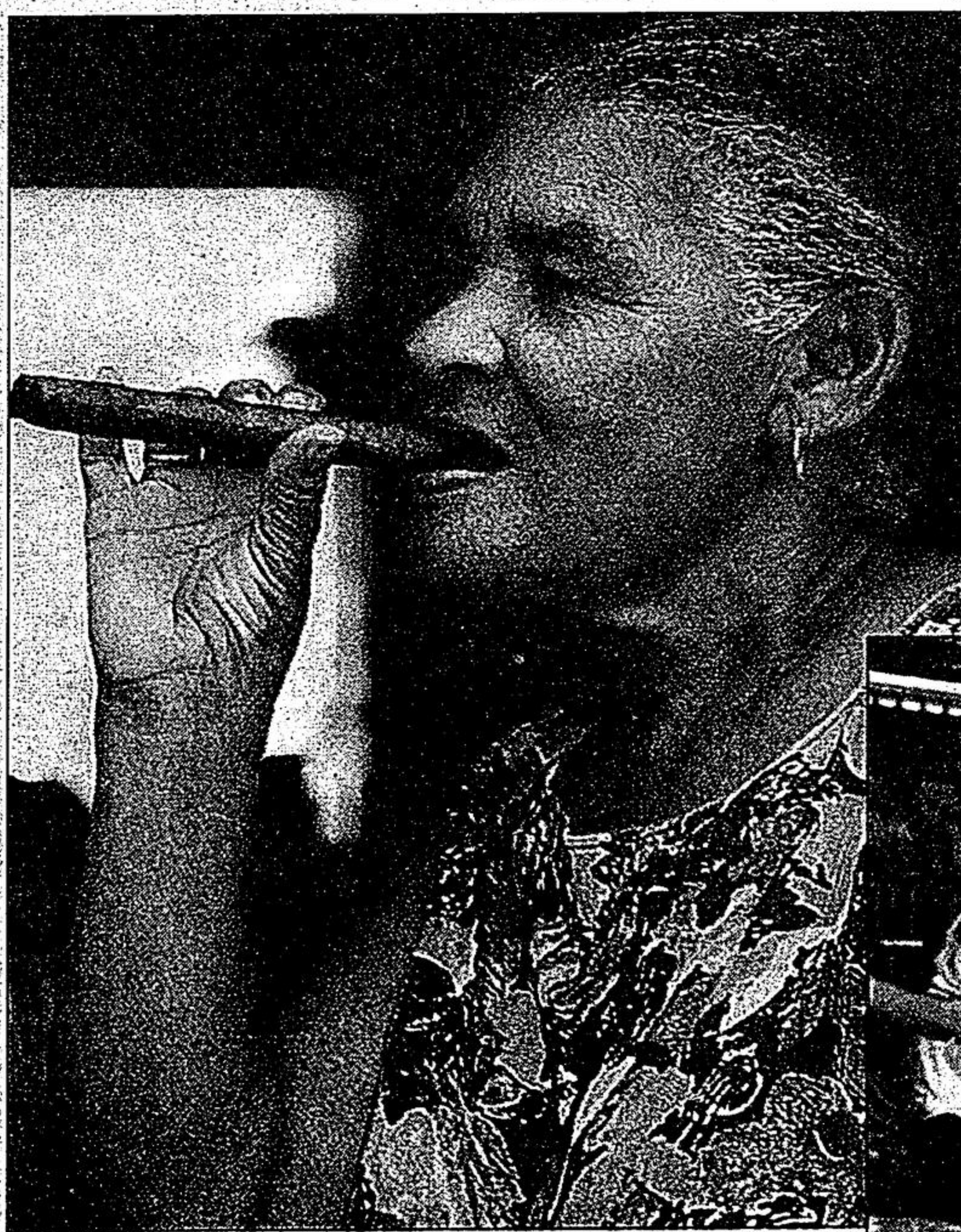
Meanwhile, most areas are quite safe for visitors, with the noted exception of some slums, particularly at nighttime, such as the Simon Bolivar sector of the capital and the back streets of Los Charamicos in Sosua, where obvious foreign tourists wearing ostentatious jewelry may be targets for muggers. In the Zona Coloniale and downtown areas of the capital, and around tourist centres, many hustlers may attempt to offer their services as guides - so please take the necessary precautions.

On my last venture across the countryside, my driver demonstrated his own safety precaution - a 9-mm Browning pistol. This weapon didn't startle me, since it was a typical issued piece during my years in the British Army. As we traveled past donkeys loaded with milk urns and chickens darting across the road, we soon stopped and proceeded on a three-kilometre donkey ride down a steep mountainside to see a splendid waterfall. My guide was a beautiful 13-year-old girl who walked alongside my donkey. What startled me, however, was the fact she was making this trip along the sharp rocks without any shoes. I've seen this before, of course, but never over such rough terrain. As I soaked in the cascading waterfall, I thought of the Canadian kids who must have a \$150 pair of Nikes, and wouldn't dream of going barefoot except in their backyards. Back in Bermuda, we'd walk over pebbles without shoes but that was it. I made sure to award my guide with a splendid tip for her efforts.

What really strikes me about the Dominican Republic is the happiness evident across the island. People are in high spirits, with smiles on their faces. Residents earn, on average, the equivalent of \$300 U.S. per month - they have barely enough money to survive and still they are alive with fulfillment. They simply treasure life.

That's what I'll remember most of the Dominican Republic. That and the old lady smoking a Cibao cigar I tried in vain to roll myself.

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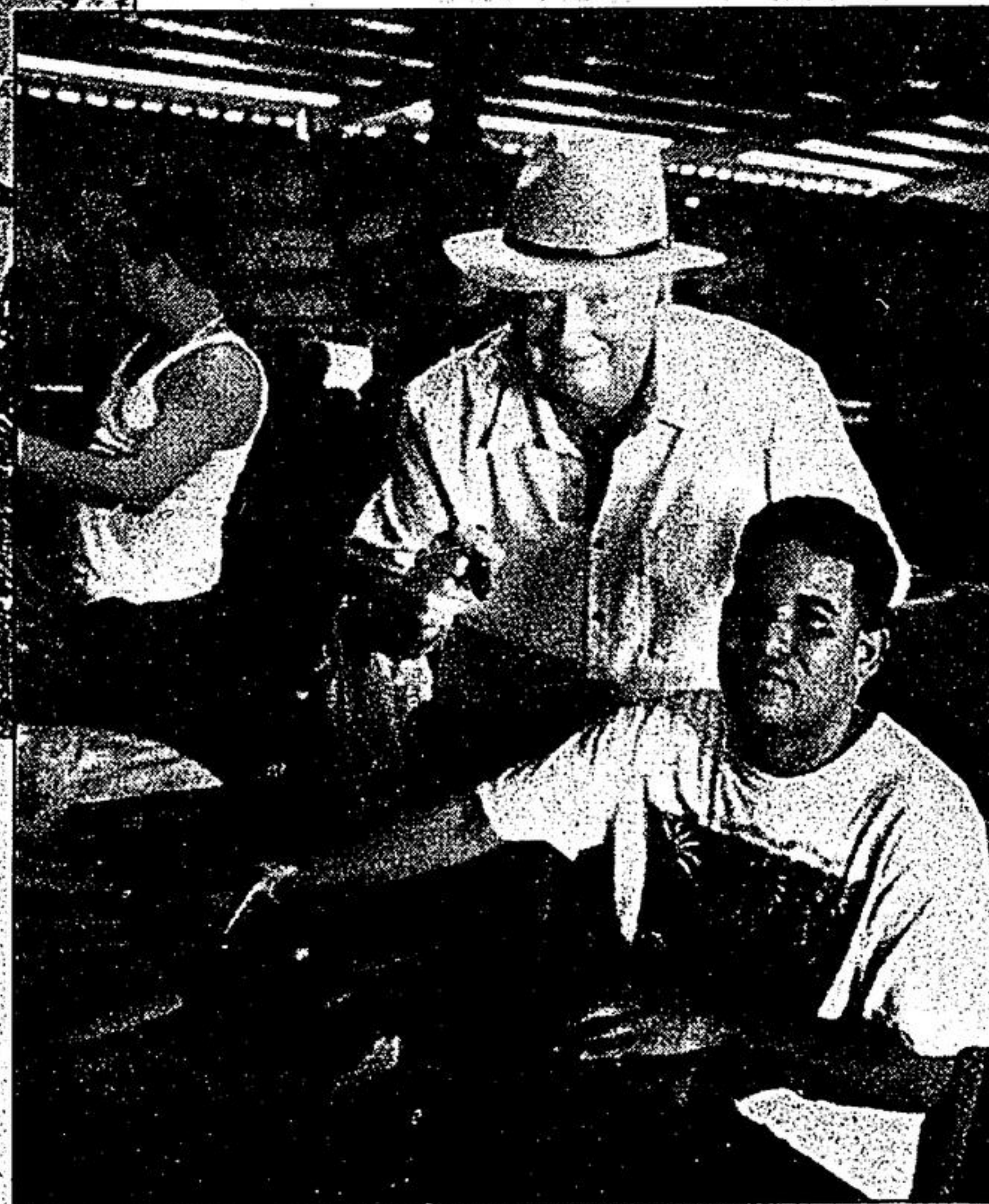


Local lady enjoys a hand rolled cigar

the Dominican Republic with the same agenda - a charter flight to the island, check into a hotel that features an all-inclusive package and remain, for the most part, either beach or pool-side. One tour into a local town might be in order, or an evening out at the disco.

The Dominican is one of the world's most underdeveloped countries, yet out in the country it's absolutely beautiful. I'm just not one to

On my way back to Puerto Plata from my cigar excursion, an intriguing site caught my eye. I had my driver stop his vehicle at a house on the roadside, where I noticed an old lady - perhaps 75 or 80 years old - hard at work, rolling her own cigars by the shed next door to her shack house. I stopped and we began to chat. Her English was not the best, but it was better than my Spanish. The coffee she offered was extremely strong, more potent than



Bart visiting a cigar factory

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