

Changing The World One Girl At A Time In The Dominican Republic

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I cover travel, lifestyle, and culture.

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The Dominican Republic, a Caribbean country in the West Indies, is known for its white sand beaches and lush mountain landscapes, but local girls on this beautiful island are at a big disadvantage. They are forced to take on activities which are not age appropriate, and with so many of them forced to spend hours on unpaid care or domestic duties. Too many adolescent girls become pregnant and are subjected to physical and/or sexual violence.

To help remedy this situation, in 2008, Fundación Tropicalia was created by Tropicalia, a sustainable tourism and real estate development of Cisneros, a global family-owned and operated business with a focus on media, communications and real estate. Fundación Tropicalia was created by Adriana Cisneros and her parents to promote the socioeconomic and environmental development in Miches. Here, in this small, isolated beach town in the Northeastern region of the Dominican Republic (DR) along the southern shores of the Samaná Bay, Adriana Cisneros, CEO of Cisneros, created Soy Niña, Soy Importante (I am a Girl, I am Important) for at-risk girls, to provide them the tools to stave off early pregnancy, gender-based violence and low self-esteem.

Born and raised in Venezuela, Adriana Cisneros spent much of her childhood in the DR, and it is here that she and her father discovered the village of Miches. They felt it was the perfect place to build a resort and family compound; but unlike other developers, they created their program to help girls well in advance of the luxury resort development. I caught up with Adriana Cisneros by phone from Miami, where she lives.



How did this all start in Miches?

We used to vacation at Casa de Campo in the DR when there were only five or six houses. When it became 30 houses, my Dad thought it was getting crowded and wanted a vacation away from the vacation. On weekends, we'd travel throughout the DR, even though there were barely roads. We went everywhere by donkey, motorcycle, airplane, helicopter and car, eventually buying 12 miles of beachfront in Miches. For the first 15 years it was like being in Eden. My father wanted me to build what Casa Campo had been for him 50 years ago, a very low key, family-oriented community.

And what are your plans for the property?

The first phase will be a Four Seasons Hotel and Residences with a really beautiful golf course on top of the mountains overlooking the bay. For the second phase, I have a good 30-year plan which I think comes from running a family business that has been around for 100 years. (Adriana Cisneros is the third generation).

How did Soy Niña, Soy Importante start?



Our family has a long tradition of doing community work; we understand how important that is. We spent a lot of time in the community trying to understand what they needed, what they were scared of, and what they were excited about with the new development arriving. We knew it would be many years before we broke ground and decided to establish a foundation which has now existed for 12 years. Most developers build a hotel and afterwards they try to figure out how

to be nice to the community. We did it in reverse. We wanted to pay attention to education because it's Latin America, and the more rural the area, the more difficult. And we wanted to ensure that the space would be developed responsibly in terms of the impact on the environment.

This is one of the most biodiverse bodies of water in the world, where all the humpback whales come with their calves in January and February. Nearby is the Silver Banks where you can dive with the whales. And all along the coast in front of the property, there are many galleon shipwrecks. I'd say we're probably the most adventurous Four Seasons owners out there.

Why did you start Soy Niña, Soy Importante?



We spent time in the 14 public schools in the area. There were no bathrooms, no running water. The boys could relieve themselves in the bushes, but the girls had to wait until they got home. We created a program to empower the community to save their own schools. We were invited to high school graduations, but girls were not showing up or graduating because the majority of them were getting pregnant or being ordered by their families to stop going to school so they could care for the younger children.

I believe in equal opportunity, and I knew when we eventually opened the application process for people to come work for us, it would only be guys, because you need a high school diploma. So, we created the camp to create a safe space for girls during the summer, and told them they had the right to finish high school and that they should not tolerate abusive behavior. The girls think they're going to a really fun camp, but it's a full-on education to help them develop their sense of agency. What we've proven is that the girls who go to camp graduate from high school. That's huge. We're changing the social fabric because we're not just educating the girls, but the families as well. The village becomes part of the camp.

What are some of the success stories?

Success is the girls going to college and getting jobs. But in the DR, success is simply being able to graduate high school not pregnant. We have two sisters from one of the poorest communities, and they graduated high school and got a full ride at a university in the DR to study abroad. One of them was just offered a scholarship to go study in Italy. We also have one girl about to graduate with honors from medical school. She's really committed to the community, and she comes back every summer



as a volunteer doctor to help us with the camp's medical component. The girls who age out return as counselors-in-training and then camp counselors. We're trying to get to the point where all our volunteers are actually from the DR, because the girls can relate to that much more.

Before we spoke to the parents, no one had told them it's not right for their daughters to be robbed of their childhood. We educated the parents so they understood there's more value in girls going to camp instead of doing domestic chores and taking care of the little kids. It became a family project.

What is your plan for the future?



I would very much like to do a version for the young boys. Our program is absolutely replicable, and we've been asked to take it to many places on so many continents. I'd like to start by helping other local foundations in the Dominican Republic.

Do you expect other developers to follow in your footsteps with sustainability and social improvement programs?

I would hope so. There's a handful of developers around the world that I truly admire. They have a deep sense of responsibility and connection to develop a place as responsibly as possible. Part of our job is to show the other developers that being sustainable can also be really good for business. You don't have to compromise to have an excellent, financially viable project because you're being socially responsible. We're going to hopefully lead by example and have others join us.

You've used the term, slow development. What does that mean?

I have the luxury of time to develop my piece of land, responsibly. No one's holding a gun to my head telling me that I need to sell X millions of dollars of sales or build X residences a year. We have a very conservative plan because we're going to be hanging out in the neighborhood for a long time. We're going to be seeing the same people for the next 40 years. The first 10 years of work that we've done are probably the most important because they have really informed what the needs of the community are.



Wellness plays an important part in today's global luxury lifestyle. So what wellness opportunities will there be at Tropicalia?

Half of the people who stay with us will want to just chill and the other half will want to do every activity possible. I want you to spend all day paddleboarding, kayaking, hiking through the cave systems and rainforest and learning about the culture of the DR.



I want people to experience the humpback whales in a way that's truly special. The coastline is full of shipwrecks to dive. There will be wonderful mountain and road biking experiences and beautiful running trails in the coconut plantations. We'll have gyms, yoga workshops, world class health experts to do two or three-day workshops, detoxes and much more.

What do you want your legacy to be?

I hope I can always keep my vision and my mission intact, because I think what we're working on right now is pretty special. I hope we always keep pushing the barriers of sustainability.

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