



2008

# PROCIGAR FESTIVAL

THREE DAYS IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

By Evan Dashevsky

**O**ur group of some 30 khaki- and jean-adorned visitors stumbles its way into the sea of man-sized tobacco stalks where a mixture of Dominican and Haitian field hands look on in amusement at our inexperience and confusion at what should be the simple task of leaf picking. After being given basic instruction on which leaves to pick, we look to the field workers' stoic faces for confirmation that we performed the task correctly. But our confusion and their bemusement wasn't quite enough to bridge the language divide. So, in the end, little more than polite stares comes back our way. Overhead, the blazing Caribbean sun beats down on our cluster of sweating tourists, fresh off the plane from locales where early March weather actually has a meaning. The

weird thing is, this motley crew of professionals and pencil pushers paid for this glimpse of manual labor. And we couldn't be happier. This was just day one of what will presumably be an annual festival put on by ProCigar—the association of Dominican premium cigar manufacturers. This was one of the first stops in our group's tour through D.R. tobacco country. The festival drew in a wide range of premium cigar fans—mostly from around the U.S. (with a spattering of Europeans, a few Russians, and at least on Israeli thrown in for good measure)—who came to see how their favorite cigars are brought to life in three days of fun, sun, cigar education, and all the free smokes you could stuff in your goodie bag.

Our first day's trip was to the fields of

Davidoff, where we were given a walking tour education on the company's fields, greenhouses, and fermentation barns. Many a picture was posed for in front of dried, hanging tobacco bundles destined to become the inner-workings of future Davidoffs, Avos, and Griffins. Next, we made our way to the Davidoff factory and were able to take in the time, effort, and sheer organizational manpower that goes into creating each cigar. If Henry Ford invented the assembly line, the Dominican cigar industry has transformed the process into an art form. Whereas Ford's aim was mass-production, with each car being virtually indecipherable from the next one down the line, the goal the Davidoff plant's 7,000-plus employees is to turn out a mass-produced line of individual pieces of smokeable art.

From the cigar rollers, to the leaf sorters, to the quality testers, creating hand-rolled cigars on this scale is a massive and complex affair—one meant for a Superman—and, as it turns out, Davidoff even has one of those. Really. One of their managers in charge of the blending area of the factory has the given first name "Superman." And the man of steel's last name? Mars. Superman Mars. For real.

After spending some time with Superman and winding our way through the sprawling complex (which was just one of Davidoff's factories) we had some time to sit down with the Dutch-born president of ProCigar, and Head of the Davidoff's manufacturing operation Henke Kelner who describes how the original goal of ProCigar was to have a "smaller personalized festival," where the CEOs and presidents could meet and greet with the participants and make them feel like family. Another reason for the festival was to showcase how far the Dominican industry has risen in quality and reputation throughout the world—accounting for 45% of the world market, even against some of those other much-heralded Caribbean cigar-producing countries.

mate festival for their first time out.

In addition to promoting the premium cigar industry, the festival was also a showcase for the Dominican Republic as a whole, and the city of Santiago in particular, where (with the exception of Altadis' Tabacalera de Garcia facilities in La Romana in the south of the island) most Dominican production take place. Night time entertainment included tours of the new Dominican Baseball exhibition and a visit to Santiago's Monumento de los Heroes de la Restauracion (a large phallic pillar akin to the Washington monument), an event planned and sponsored by the City Hall of Santiago, complete with traditional foods and Carnaval revelers.

During the tour of the Matasa headquarters' labyrinthine corridors of workers, our guide mentioned that the fact the industry hires so many female workers has been a boon to the local economy. When female members of the family get money, the funds will be saved and invested in the family, whereas when only the male head of households receive funds, oftentimes the funds end up invested in the liquor industry. And a simple

many factors for this relative prosperity, but undoubtedly the jobs provided by the premium cigar industry have had a lot to contribute.

The third and final day included a visit to the General Cigar fields in Mao, and a visit to the General Cigar factory (maker of Partagas and Cohiba, among others) and a visit with CEO Daniel Nuñez. Finally, the third night ended in similar fashion to how the first two came to a close—with lavish, choreographed entertainment, open bar, and free smokes handed out by beautiful and scantily-clad cigar gals.

For those who wished, there was a chance to tack-on on an additional trip for a weekend at the luxurious Casa de Campo in La Romana, home to the world-renowned Pete Dye-created Teeth of the Dog golf course. After a weekend of relaxation and sun-baked links, visitors were treated to a tour of Altadis' Tabacalera de Garcia facilities, one of the largest cigar factories in the world (and maker of H. Upman, Montecristo, and Romeo y Julieta), and a visit with General Manager José Seijas who told us about his history in the business and gave us some insight into



Other trips included tours of the La Aurora facilities (one of the country's oldest), where we were able to meet with La Aurora president Guillermo Leon who heralded the ProCigar organization as a way of bringing competitors together to solve common goals. The festival itself "gives consumers a chance to look behind the scenes of the factories and the operation." Later, the same day, we took a tour of the Manufactura de Tabacos (Matasa) facilities (home of Fonseca cigars) where we met with CEO Manuel Quesada, whose smooth southern drawl sounds somewhat jarring *this* far south (he explains it stems from his education at North Florida University). Quesada explained how it took two years to get this first festival together, and they feel they've met their goal of having a small, inti-

glimpse at the surrounding community shows the positive influence of the cigar industry's presence. Many of the cigar workers live in the neighboring town of Tamboril. And, to be sure, by most Western standards, Tamboril, and parts of Santiago, are poor—with rolling black outs, if electricity is available at all, and where a smattering of tin-roofed shacks scattered about. But for any visitors from the U.S. who have traveled through Latin America or dared off the resort during their Caribbean getaway, this part of the D.R. is far more developed and stable than other parts of the global neighborhood. There are

what appeared to be one of the most advanced operations in Hispanola.

Overall, the first ProCigar factory was a small triumph for an industry that has become a major force in the scene. One which will only improve with time. One of the organizers admitted that one thing they learned was to turn the music down at some of the evening events (Dominicans like to party loud), which was a bit too much for some of the older visitors. But it was merely a small bump in the road for what will hopefully become the destination festival for smokers from around the world for years to come.