



The Dominican Republic, in the northern Caribbean, offers beautiful beaches and cool, mountain resorts, and is only a few hours by air from the Southeast U.S. [CLICK HERE](#) for my "All I Know About" fact sheet on the D.R.

## "Knight of the Flies"

*\* Every word of this is absolutely true, except for the part about meeting Richard Branson.*

By MARK GILCHRIST  
Special to Planet Earth

**One thing that Virgin Group founder, music executive, space pioneer and world-record holder Sir Richard Branson and I have in common is that we have both survived an armed bank robbery.** I know this, because we were in the same bank, and it was being robbed.

Richard and I are alive today due to the incompetence of the bank, and of the robbers, and also because Branson's ingenious stunt work gave us a clean getaway. See, it went like this, (all while guns were blazin!)

"That your motorbike out back?" a guy behind me whispered as three men in front of me waved guns right at me and a dozen other people. The men were robbing the Dominican Republic Savings and Loan, or at least they were trying to.

They were failing, because it was Friday afternoon and the bank was pretty much out of cash. I know, because I had watched moments before, as the only teller in the bank emptied two drawers of U.S. bills – the kind robbers love around here – into the hands of the "Bank Whisperer," (the guy behind me,) who then stuffed the huge wads of cash into his pants pockets.

"Uh-huh," I said, both hands raised way above my head because I'm scared of guns.

The robbers were getting agitated, and were now trying to rob the customers, who, to my surprise, actually resisted. One woman slid her money into the teller window, saying that they could steal the bank's money, but not her money. The teller pushed it back out, and the woman shoved it back in, and they kept at this until a robber grabbed the cash from both of them.

"When Benjamin flies, we fly," the whisperer whispered as he pulled a pile of U.S. \$100 bills from his pocket. "You in?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "I guess." Not sure why I agreed, but it was all pretty exciting. He threw the stack of bills in the air and shouted; "Money for everybody!" And we ran. We were outside in a flash, and the

robbers didn't chase us because they were picking up the cash and fighting all the customers for it. Anyway, the Whisperer, or Yeller, or Tossler – whatever – grabbed my helmet off the seat as I jumped on and started the bike. He took another helmet off the bike next to us and tucked a "Benjamin" under the seat strap.

He climbed on as I dropped it into first and we roared out of there. He put our helmets on, which was kind of an awkward thing for me, but I let him do it because we had just been in a bank robbery and life was different now.

How do I know this was Richard Branson, one of the richest men in the world, owner of a zillion companies, a world-rokin' adventurer and class-A cool guy? He told me.

"Can you keep a secret, Chap?" He said over my left shoulder.

"Uh-h, yeah... Aren't I already?"

"Do you know who I am?"

"You're a crazy guy who throws money at people," I said.

"Ha, there is truth to that. Name's Richard," he said. "Richard Branson." You?"

"Umm, Mark..."

I need to go to Sosua," he said. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Shouldn't we just go to the police?"

"Why would we want to do that?"

"Well, we just witnessed a crime..."

"And made a fast getaway! "Look, I'll explain later," he said, "but I have millions of reasons why I can't be on this island."

"Umm, millions? Can you explain... now?"

"Seriously?"

"Well, curious... ly."

Okay Folks, stop there. I know you're thinking; "How can they talk on a motorcycle? Crazy!" But really, with only 150ccs in one cylinder, we couldn't ride more than about 50mph, so it was an easy ride through downtown Santo Domingo.

This is the capital of the Dominican Republic, and it is beautiful and reeks of history – it's a UNESCO Heritage Site. Ponce De Leon was a big deal here. Okay, back.

"I need to buy some property here," Richard said, "and funny thing is, as soon

as people know who I am, the price goes through the bloody roof."

"Right..." I said. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"What?"

"C'mon, the real Richard Branson has people who do things like that for him."

"Well, yes, but this is personal," he said. "Isn't everything?" Heck, I didn't really care what excuse he gave; I was just thrilled to be with one of the most successful businessmen in the world – and doing him a favor, no less!

"Yes, well, I was also hoping to get away for a few days... Now it seems I'm in a bit of a pickle."

"How's that?"

"Well, the property is a surprise birthday present for my daughter," he said. "She wants to build an equestrian center and baseball camp for handicapped children. If she finds out I'm here..."

The real estate thing helped explain the Benjamins, at least. Equal to 5,000 D.R. Pesos, that is the go-to bill around here for drug dealers and real estate investors.

Besides, I even thought that maybe I could even maybe get a few business tips from him. Maybe...

"Say, do you think you could give me some tips on starting a business?" I said.

"Well, I don't think you'd like my consulting fee – why don't you just read my book?" he said, referring to his 2012 best-seller; **"Like a Virgin; Secrets They Won't Teach You at Business School."**

"Well, okay," I said. "So, we head for the north coast?"

"My meeting's not until this evening," he said. "But let's get out of here. Everyone will be talking about that robbery, and I can't have people asking me questions that I can't answer honestly."

"Cool," I said. "Let's go." I steered the bike out of the city and onto the highway toward La Vega. Holding the throttle wide open, we scooted along at a steady 45 mph.

The island of Hispaniola is pretty simple; It is long and thin, much like the larger Cuba to its west, and much like the smaller Puerto Rico to the east.

The D.R. takes up the eastern two-thirds of the island, and its residents are much better off than are Haitians, who have suffered under poor governorship for centuries. A beautiful mountain range rises up in the center of the country, above beach-laden, tourist areas of Puerto Plata, Sosua and Las Terrenas on the northern shore, and Santo Domingo on the southern shore.

After about an hour of riding, I stopped for gas, pulling into a place with a few pumps open. Gas stations are full-service here, with a man at each pump who will fill your tank and take your money as if that one pump was his own private business.

We got off the bike and I said; "Fill it up," and the guy did not understand even those three words of English. Incredulous, I said it a few more times – "FILL... IT... UP" – only a bit louder each time, and with increasing frustration. This, of course, did not work. People on motorbikes here usu-

*I meet the most wonderful people...*



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Though not as famous for cigars as its infamous neighbor, Cuba, the Dominican Republic is well-known for tobacco and cigars.



Slaves in the Dominican Republic held **Carnaval** hundreds of years ago as just an annual celebration, and white people blended in religious notes over the centuries. The festival got its big boost in 1844 when the D.R. declared independence from Haiti, and the month-long celebration now culminates each year on Feb. 27, Independence Day.

ally buy only a liter or two of gas at a time, and the guy just couldn't figure me out. "Full," Richard said, smiling and with one thumb in the air. The man smiled back, put the nozzle in my tank and filled it up. Richard gave him cash before I could reach for my wallet. "Thanks for the fill-up," I said, getting on the bike.

"Thanks for the ride." "Boy, that is so annoying," I said as we rolled out of there. "You'd think these guys could learn just a few words of English!" "Mark," he said. "Yeah?" "Do you have any control over that?" "What?" I said. "Yeah, well, if people complain, maybe he'll catch on, right?" "Probably not, and if he ever does, you'll be long gone," Richard said. "Deal with the situation in front of you, not the one you wish was in front of you." "Yeah, I guess so," I said. "Say, I'm thinking of starting a business. Should I incorporate or use a simple partnership?" "That depends on the partner," he said. "So, after we pass La Vega, we'll head toward Puerto Plata and at some point, we'll take a right to Sosua."

"Okay, just tell me where to go," I said. Richard lives in the British Virgin Islands, just on the other side of Puerto Rico, and I guess he's been here before, right? So I let him guide the way.

We had to stop again, because Richard had to take a leak, and we had to stop at one of those modern, American chain restaurants, because Sir Richard could not take a leak just anywhere. "I've peed in too many crappy places in my life," he said.

I bought a few bottles of water while he was in the restroom, and then we found a corner table. We just sat quietly and people-watched. I thought nothing of it, but he was enthralled, which struck me as odd, because the employees there all looked bored and sluggish, like the last thing you would want in an employee. I took advantage of the quiet moment to ask my supposed tutor about business.

"How do you start an IPO?" I said. "I mean, how do you know when to take a business public..."

"Shhh... Do you see this?" he said. "Just look at these employees."

"Yeah, they look dead," I said. "I bet you would fire all of them."

"Ha! No, I would fire the manager," he said. "C'mon, what are the chances that all these people are that lazy? This is a perfect example of poor leadership."

He was actually excited about this dysfunctional operation, not for what it was, I guessed, but for what it could be. "These folks all look like they're here for the paycheck, and that is wrong! A good manager can help them do much better work, and with pride - do something they will look forward to every day."

"But all they do is serve burgers," I said, "and fries..."

"No, they serve customers," he said, "customers who are people. A good manager could turn this place around, and these employees could enjoy their work, and take on challenges and problems with enthusiasm. What do you think employees value the most?"

"A paycheck?" "No," Richard said. "No, no, no, no, no! They need a paycheck, but people love to do quality work that they can be proud of, and what they don't like is when they cannot do quality work, either because of the tools they are given, the time, parts or work environment. A good manager could take this broken record of an operation and turn it into a hit song!"

"But, sometimes it's the employee's fault, right?" I said. "I mean, some people are just beyond hope."

"Very few," he said. "A person fails at something for any number of reasons, and usually a good leader can fix that."

"I'm a pretty good manager. I mean, I can manage people when they behave," I

said. "But the bad apples? Forget them." "Then you aren't a good manager."

"A what? What'd you call me?"

"Sorry, but I don't hire managers to only lead people who do well on their own,"

Richard said. "I hire them to fix problems, fix systems, and when necessary, fix people."

"Fix people? You make them sound like..."

"Like machines? So be it," he said. "Okay, an employee is, say, a motorbike, okay? You

have to steer it in the right direction, keep filling it with gas, change its oil and adjust things every once in a while, and make repairs when things break - no difference." Whew! I asked a question about IPOs and got a psychology lecture - this just wasn't working out. We got back on the bike and back on the road, cruising through La Vega where they were taking down decorations from the recent, massive Carnaval celebration. Rolling through Santiago De Los Caballeros, we approached Cibao Stadium, and it was packed.

"You like baseball?" Richard said. "I always like to catch a game when I'm here. Truly boring sport, but there's some great talent here." He was referring to the fact



Most motorcycles in the D.R. have engines smaller than 200ccs.



All MLB clubs have recruiting facilities in the D.R., home of 10-percent of the league's players.



The D.R. is on an island, so expect to, at some point during your visit, stop a guy on a bicycle and buy fresh fish from a cooler.

that baseball has been a national sport in the D.R. for 130 years and that all of the Major League Baseball clubs in America have recruiting camps here. In fact, baseball is so popular in Cuba, the D.R. and Puerto Rico that I might refer to them as the "Baseball Belt of the Caribbean," but I won't, because nobody else does, and no one listens to me anyway.

We pulled in and parked, put our hats and sunglasses back on and walked in. Richard bought us tickets and we sat away from the crowd, far enough down along the third baseline that we could chat with the left fielder if we knew enough Spanish.

We arrived in the second inning, and after another inning and two outs, a pack of drunken tourists showed up and sat a few rows behind us. They talked too loudly, laughed too hard and heckled everyone and everything they saw. It was annoying.

"Let's move," Richard said.

"We were here first." "Well, that, chap, is the deal you wish you had..." He was right, and I knew it even before he said it, and he just had to say it in that stupid, phony, royal accent of his. So anyway, we got up, and as I was about to glare at the bozos behind us, I saw Richard smiling and waving to them. I asked him about it as we walked a few sections over to third base.

"What's with the smile?" I said as we sat down.

"What?" "You smiled at those guys, while I just wanted to punch them," I said.

"Yes, I had that urge, too," he said. "But Mark, never make your enemies hate you."

"Whaa? But that's what enemies are for..."

"That's an odd notion, chap," he said. "No, you need to make your enemies respect and fear you, but hate will only empower them to do emotional things you can never predict, and over which you will have no control."

We didn't stay much longer because, frankly, both teams were losing. We left the stadium and got back on the road - It was

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a beautiful day for a ride through this beautiful country.

We arrived in Sosua with an hour to spare, so we took a walk up and down the beach south of town. To describe this place best would be to describe it like this: Deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean give way to a calm and beautiful cove, which turns into a beach that rises up to a thin grove of palm and sea grape trees and a fantastical party scene. Nearly a half-mile of small restaurants, bars, souvenir shops and other stores line the beach between Sosua and Los Charamicos.

This town is noted for its immigrant wave of some 4,000 Jewish refugees from World War II and the subsequent europeization of the area. The men Richard was to meet were from Holland, and he would meet them at an outdoor restaurant with a Dutch-sounding name.

Before we knew it, the big meeting was upon us. The restaurant was in town, and was a little more upscale than those on the beach. Not privy to details, I offered to sit this one out and Richard agreed, so I sat a few tables away and ordered the biggest steak I could find because Richard was buying. He had given me a few hundred-dollar bills, (is that all he carries?) and asked me to covertly pay for everyone's meal. Not sure why, but I like this sort of high-rolling, spy stuff so I agreed.

I couldn't hear the conversation, but watching expressions and such, I could pretty much figure out which party was winning, and at the start at least, that party did not look like Richard. I saw a lot of furrowed brows and frowns, beard-stroking and forehead-wiping. Then, about an hour in, there was tension, and it held for the longest time, ending with the Dutch men nodding their heads as if in submission, and Richard cracking that huge smile so familiar to me. A few minutes later, they all stood up and shook hands, and we left.

All in all, it could have been an ordinary meeting, except for the flies.

It was a very calm night, and gym-sock humid, and the bugs were out. I had to keep up a constant attack to guard my table from flies, and the Dutch men made no effort to conceal their wrath for the insects, flinging their arms about and flapping napkins like surrender flags.

What struck me, though, was the incredible calm with which Richard ignored the pests. One fly pretty much stayed on or near his face the whole time without so much as an acknowledgement from the knight. Others circled his legs and played tag with his toes. Nothing. He just locked eyes with the men as they talked.

The scene appeared so improbable to me; to think that one of the richest men in the world could be beaten by a simple fly, and he was powerless to swat it away. Wow.

I paid for the meal and gave the change back to Richard, having practiced, (just in my head, okay?) how to react when he would say; "Aww, buddy, just keep it." But he didn't and I didn't, and we moved on.

"So, how did it go?" I said. "Did you get what you wanted?"

"Oh, yes!" he said. "And more — they were holding out on me for the land near a beach, but, they came to their senses."

"Great. Umm, so it's getting dark. Should we find a hotel somewhere?"

"Oh," he said. And then he said the most normal thing: "My hotel is next door." But coming out of the mouth of a billionaire, I kind of wondered what he meant by "my." We walked over to a fairly new, six-story building and walked in and past the front desk. The clerk looked up, smiled and said: "Good evening, Mr. Branson."

Okay, still normal, right? No, not normal, and the next hour got even more billionaire-less-normal.

On the way up to the room, I asked Richard about... the flies.

"Oh, them," he said. "A dreadful nuisance. Did you see how those chaps tried so hard to fight them off, though?"

"Yes, I did. But you didn't seem to be bothered at all," I said. "Some kind of meditation-thing you have going?"

"Not at all," he said. "Just focus. In negotiations, or anything really, you have to focus on what's important. Those little flies were not important and they weren't worth a bit of my attention. I was giving the deal in front of me 100 percent of my attention, while those men were working some kind of deals with the flies. That's why I got what I wanted."

Richard unlocked the door and gave me



Playa Sosua, the half-mile of sand filled with bars, restaurants and tacky stores on the north shore of the Dominican Republic.

the key card.

"Use this at the pool for drinks," he said. I had been wondering where I would sleep tonight — and admittedly hoping Richard would at least go halves with me on a room — but now I was puzzled. We walked into the nicest hotel room I have ever been in. It wasn't a suite, but just one, large room with floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides for an incredible view of the ocean and coast, a bed, small kitchen and sitting area, and, yeah, a not-so-crappy bathroom.

"Okay, but, um... This is your room, right?" I said.

"Yes, one of my favorites," he said, picking up two cell phones from the kitchen counter. "When will they make these bloody things so they won't let you leave the hotel without them?" He checked a few messages on one of the phones. "I tell you, chap, I was really in a fix this morning, and you saved the day. For that, I am truly grateful."

"Well, yeah, sure. I..."

"Say, could you give me one more lift?" he said as he straightened some things in a closet and closed a dresser drawer. "Just a few miles..."

"Yeah, okay, but uhh..."

"Great!" he said as we walked out of the room to the elevator. "I hope you will stay for a while, will you? How about a few weeks? Room service is on me, okay?"

"Umm, sure," I said. "I'll take the couch?"

"Ha! You're funny. No, you can take the whole room."

So, yeah, right there, I went from stark fear about where to sleep tonight, to falling into crazy luxury. Wow! And things were about to get even "wow-er."

We walked down the street to my motor-

"Yes, the family is expecting me. Wait 'til I tell them about my day — they just won't believe it!" And then, right there, I just had to say the stupidest thing, I mean, really, I didn't have to say it, but then, I'm stupid.

"Say, I was hoping to, uh..."

"What, chap? What were you hoping?"

"Well, I wanted to learn a few things about running a business from the man who knows everything about..."

"You did, did you?" And for the first time today, I could see actual disappointment on Richard's face. "Well, I certainly tried," he said. "Tell you what, I'll whip up a few things and email them to you, okay?"

"Okay... great!" I gave him my card, and, well frankly, I didn't expect anything. I mean, as soon as he gets on that plane, I thought, I am history without a trace, save a few room-service bills that he will never see.

So, there he went. The man with whom I had actually escaped an armed robbery only 10 hours ago, and then rode clear across this country on a motorcycle, just vanished. He stepped up into a Gulfstream 5, and then he was gone almost as quickly as he had appeared. I waited and watched the plane roll down the runway and take off, because that is always such a cool thing to see, and it gives you a few more minutes to turn your goodbye into memories.

#### ONE WEEK LATER

So, I checked my email this morning and I was shocked to see a message from "VIRGIN-ONE@virgin.net" and I opened it.

Hello, Mark,

I hope that I have thanked you sufficiently for your tremendous help last week. Holly had a beautiful birthday and she loves the present you helped get her. (We plan to open the equestrian facility first, in 2019, and we would love to have you join us!)

How was the hotel? I remember you didn't have luggage, so if you borrowed my underwear, that's okay — just keep it though, all right?

Well, here is the business advice I promised you. I hope it serves you well in all your ventures and adventures!

#### Richard's 6 rules for a successful business:

1. Don't make your enemies hate you. Make them respect and fear you.
2. Frustration is an emotion that serves no purpose and will only cloud your thinking.
3. Leadership is critical to effective employees, and employees are critical to a business.
4. Anyone can manage good people, a real manager fixes broken ones.
5. People value their ability to do quality work more than a paycheck.
6. Focus on the deal in front of you and ignore what is not important.

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