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Dig Days

Omar Sharif and Funny Girl

I travelled recently with Omar Sharif to the Dominican Republic by personal invitation of the president, Leonel Fernandez. I was invited to receive an honorary doctorate degree from the Catholic University in Santo Domingo, as well as to give a public lecture.

In this article, however, I would like to talk about Omar Sharif and how he was received and honoured by the president and the people of the Dominican Republic. Maria Gabriella Bonetti, the Dominican Republic ambassador to Egypt, and Kathleen Martinez, the minister counsellor of cultural affairs, were enthusiastic about inviting and honouring Sharif at the third International Film Festival in Santo Domingo. We convinced him to go; he always likes to say that he is an old man of 78 and cannot travel, but actually he is only 77 and is healthier than a young man.

When Sharif arrived with his son Tarek and grandson, Omar, they went directly to the Cap Cana beach resort in Punta Cana, a little piece of paradise on earth. There they relaxed and enjoyed the beautiful greenery the country has to offer. No words can explain the unique atmosphere of this sanctuary, for I have never seen any place like it.

Sharif would get up late and go about his morning routine. At around two in the afternoon, he would walk down to the seashore where he would feel free as a bird, exploring the beauty of the area. Sharif never eats during the day; you can say that I learnt this from him. At around eight o'clock in the evening we would all go for dinner at one of the many delicious resort restaurants.

Sharif is one of the most generous people I know. Upon arriving at the hotel he offers tips to all the staff members, as opposed to people who give tips [illegible] sonally invited by the president.

Later on, a great press conference was held at the resort, which was attended by the American actor Michael Madsen, who is known for his action movies. During the press conference Sharif spoke in Spanish and answered all the questions, which were mostly about his films, *Doctor Zhivago*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*. People are still fascinated by these movies, which are both on Hollywood's top 100 films list.

We spent more time relaxing, then took a helicopter ride to Santo Domingo city where we stayed in one of the best hotels. On the opening night of the film festival, Sharif arrived in a chariot like his character from *Lawrence of Arabia* and walked down the red carpet smiling and waving to the thousands of cameras, TVs, and screaming fans. Very few actors of his age still receive such honours, but Sharif has charisma. I turned my head and saw him dancing a *Merengue*, one of the most popular Dominican dances. He was so happy. He gave several interviews, and he met the president and his beautiful wife, Margarita. The president of the Dominican Republic is a very nice man. He is loved by his people, who are allowed near him — there was no fear, no guards, nor any hidden security. The president was among his people; he is one of them. I have never seen this before in any other country.

The festival soon started with the announcement that Omar Sharif, who was sitting next to the president and the first lady, was the dedicated honorary guest of the evening.

To my surprise, they showed a nice 15-minute film about Sharif's career as an actor starting with his first film *Struggle in the Valley* with Faten Hamama, the beautiful actress whom he married after their sizzling romance. The film even included his Hollywood movie, *Funny Girl*, in which Sharif, who often enjoys to remind us at dinner how he was a beautiful young man, was singing with Barbara Streisand and later kissed her. This kiss exploded throughout the Arab world and caused quite a commotion.



To be continued...