

# Fathom digs deep

Phil Davies tests out Carnival's new 'social impact' cruise brand making waves in the industry

@travjournalist

**L**ittle Jalisa looked quizzically at my attempt to draw an animal, before picking up a blue crayon to start scribbling away on her own sheet of paper.

Her blue cat against a backdrop of flowers put my rudimentary attempt at a monkey to shame, yet I was still delighted to find we were communicating through drawing, despite not speaking the same language.

Our creative encounter came about in a school for underprivileged children in the

village of San Marcos in the Dominican Republic. My visit was one of the first trial shore excursions run by Fathom, the new social-impact cruise line created by Carnival Corporation, ahead of its first sailings from Miami to the Dominican Republic and Cuba in May.

The start-up brand will use P&O Cruises' smallest ship, *Adonia*, to operate the alternating itineraries, which in the case of the Dominican Republic will involve a three-night stay at the new purpose-built port resort of Amber Cove in the north of the island.

## ► SCHOOL'S OUT

The Fathom concept is designed to let travellers make a positive impact on local communities, and our visit involved taking part in fun art, music and sports – in this case baseball – with a group of 11 to 13-year-olds from low-income backgrounds.

On the 20-minute drive from

the port, Danielle Tyner, team coordinator with local social enterprise partner Entrena, told us that being able to speak English could have a real impact on these youngsters eventually finding a job, which may explain why they were attending even in the school holidays, some walking a mile from home to do so.

After being given a nametag and 16 simple Spanish phrases to start us off, we pulled up at the Jesuit-inspired George Arzeno Brugal Fe y Alegria school and were greeted by singing schoolchildren as excited as we were to meet up.

The assorted passengers and staff from our ship's youth team then joined the children for



→ a get-to-know-you session of singing and dancing, before being paired up to sit at adjoining desks.

I'm ashamed to say my knowledge of the Spanish language was at least as poor as 10-year-old Jalisa's grasp of English, so it came as some relief to hear we would start with our drawing exercise. We did at least cover the word for 'cat' - even as Jalisa's creative skills outshone my abstract attempt - then the whole group got together to show off their respective drawings. This led to much hilarity as multilingual Danielle gathered us together to compare and contrast our work.

► SWEET TALK

At this point I had to wave goodbye to Jalisa because time was pressing to participate in a second Fathom activity - helping to produce artisan chocolate bars at a cooperative set up by 22 local women high in the hills, a 45-minute drive from Amber Cove.

Those on the Chocal factory tour join the all-female staff in a 'bean

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to bar' process, creating handmade chocolates from locally grown organic cacao, one of the most important crops in the Dominican Republic.

Established in 2007, the project provides an escape from menial jobs in nearest city Puerto Plata, in a country where more than 40% of people live below the poverty line.

The Chocal founders secured a government loan in 2013 to buy new machinery and move into producing finished chocolate products for two of the country's largest supermarkets.

However, that loan needs to be repaid for the women to start making

a profit from their fledgling business - and that's where Fathom passengers come in. Their involvement in raising the production process will boost the \$4,500 a month brought in by chocolate bar sales.

Currently, around 550 Chocal bars are wrapped in a typical morning. Once the 704-passenger *Adonia* starts its three-day stays in Amber Cove, up to 35 passengers per tour will participate twice a day to boost the production cycle, from cultivating cacao trees to wrapping the final chocolate bars for sale. The aim is to help the factory thrive so the cooperative can employ more local women in a region with limited employment opportunities.

► FORCE FOR CHANGE

These are just two out of 11 activities planned by Fathom in the Dominican Republic under the banners of educational, environmental and economic development, with the likes of reforestation, house-building, constructing clay water filters and

RIGHT AND BELOW RIGHT: Chocal factory

BELOW: The George Arzeno Brugal Fe y Alegria school



working with people who have special needs also on the cards.

I'm the first to admit to a deeply cynical preconception about so-called 'do-gooder' activities before arriving in the Dominican Republic, but I was genuinely engaged and moved by my two Fathom activities. These shore excursions are unlike others, offering a chance to get involved in local communities rather than making the usual transitory cruise-ship visit.

It remains to be seen whether the Fathom experiment will prove successful - cruises on the soon-to-be revamped *Adonia* have already started to be discounted - but there's no doubting it is a bold initiative and one that deserves full support from the trade and consumers alike.

**BOOK IT:** Prices for the seven-day trips to the Dominican Republic start at \$974 cruise-only, including all social-impact activities and related supplies. Cuba prices lead in at \$1,800. All sailings depart from Miami.

fathom.org TW

PICTURES: STEVE DUNLOP