

# Inspiring Latina: Christine Dennison is an Adventurer Breaking Barriers for Women in Exploration



by Raquel Reichard  
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**T**he face of exploration is, frankly, white and male. From school history lessons to media portrayals, we've learned about the adventures and discoveries of **Lewis and Clark**, **Edmund Hillary** and **Neil Armstrong**, among several other dudes. But the erasure of women explorers doesn't mean we haven't been traveling deep oceans and high mountains.

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Case in point: Meet **Christine Dennison**, a barrier-breaking explorer and diver. The 47-year-old Colombian-Mexican badass was the first woman to dive and explore beneath the Arctic Sea ice and ice caves of the Canadian High Arctic and the first woman to dive the menacing piranha-filled waters of the Amazon's Rio Negro and its tributaries.

In 2016, she was even awarded the Brazilian Navy League Medal of Honor for her discovery of a lost WWII United States Submarine R-12 and its crew of 42 entombed sailors, two of whom considered Brazilian heroes, 600 feet deep into the water of the Florida straits.

That's not all, the New York-born adventurer, who has traveled through more than 30 countries, is also the founder and co-chair of Mad Dog Expeditions, a consulting company that plans, prepares and executes expeditions for private and corporate clients.

We chatted with the Inspiring Latina about her passion for exploration, the challenges facing women adventurers, some of her favorite moments and advice for Latinas with similar traveling dreams.

**You grew up in New York City. What sparked your interest in exploration?**

I was born in Manhattan, and my mother was raised in Manhattan in a bilingual/tri-cultural family. As a single child, I traveled from a young age with my mother and was back and forth between New York and Mexico City often. My mom instilled in me the importance of seeking knowledge on whatever I questioned, and I questioned a lot of things. She always made traveling fun and exciting, and her spirit sparked a deeper interest in my wanting to see and explore things that I could not easily do. She loved learning about everything and had a great sense of humor, even when things didn't go as planned during our travels.

### **What were your parents' initial thoughts to your career path?**

My parents divorced when I was young, and I was raised by my mother and grandmother in New York City. I come from a family of Colombian-Spanish women who are very strong and very independent. My mother passed along her love of experiencing life through travel and different cultures. She stressed that I work hard and be self-reliant from a very early age. She was always nervous about my travels, as she did not want me to get hurt in any way, but was extremely supportive. She would have loved to travel and explore as I have done, but not in the same fashion – she liked her comforts.

### **You are the first woman to dive in the High Arctic and the first to dive the Amazon Rio Negro tributaries. What's that like for you, making history?**

It was not something I set out to do, nor did I seek press for it. I was unaware of this as I was working very hard on these expeditions. In the Rio Negro, my company colleagues and I were the first to have scuba dived in the flooded tributaries of the Rio Negro, and I happened to be the only woman on the team. It's a privilege to see and experience remote regions of the world, the people and wildlife.

### **What are some challenges women explorers experience?**

I would say that women still need to prove themselves in certain circles within the exploration community. There are misconceptions that arise based on looks, physical characteristics and more. Women who want to explore should

seek out mentors who will be generous with their time and experience, and keep learning and educating themselves on topics of interest that they are passionate about.



*Dennison during an expedition in the Amazon*

**How do you try to overcome these challenges?**

I believe that there is something to be learned from good and bad experiences. I try to surround myself with friends and colleagues that are supportive and whom I can learn from. I am a member of the prestigious Explorers Club, which includes female members of all ages from all over the world. It is humbling to meet some of my heroines who inspired me as a young girl. It is my hope that with education and mentoring, the next generation of women will reach greater success and break down a few walls.

**Do you think your Latina upbringing has helped make you a better traveler? If so, in what way(s)?**

Absolutely! Having been raised with different cultures and languages has taught me to be more respectful, tolerant, patient and less fearful. I embrace all the varied cultures and eccentricities of people and places when I travel.

**You've traveled more than 30 countries and have even received the Brazilian medal of honor for your research and discovery. What stands out to you as the most rewarding experience from your adventures?**

My heart is always affected by the people and animals of the many places I have been to. It's difficult for me to isolate one specific place or adventure. However, the Arctic community of Resolute Bay, Nunavut is very close to my heart. I love the polar regions and the Inuit. I have spent a lot of time there, and they remind me of Latin communities, as family and children are very central to life and they respect and learn from their elders.

**Being an adventurer is physically and mentally taxing. How do you prepare for an exploration?**

I always do my homework on the expedition/destination and plan accordingly. If I need training on equipment, gear or robotics, I learn from the best colleagues in the field. I keep physically fit daily and follow a healthy lifestyle overall. Mental training and agility is important and achieved through breathing exercises, visualization and rest.

**Your motto is: "Travel sustains my sanity." How so?**

I love seeing new places, people and things. I am naturally a very curious person, so travel curbs my wanderlust; it makes me feel more enlightened as a person and calms me. Travel not only opens your eyes to the world but it also opens your mind, heart and soul.

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**Any advice for young Latina readers who are interested in travel but consider it unfeasible?**

Latina women are curious, strong, charming and warm. We can accomplish anything we set out to conquer. There are many areas within the travel industry that offer potential for great careers for women. I think a great starting point is to discover and explore home countries of our families. Experience is the key to life and learning. Education creates opportunities. Every Latino is different, and the culture and traditions are rich and varied. If you grew up eating Spanish food, you understand the nuances of the many ways to cook *pasteles*, *pernil* and empanadas – they are all uniquely different and delicious, just like us! I am a strong supporter of mentoring. If there is a woman you admire, seek her out for advice and help.