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Skip Punta Cana and Head to Ecofriendly Cabarete in the Dominican Republic

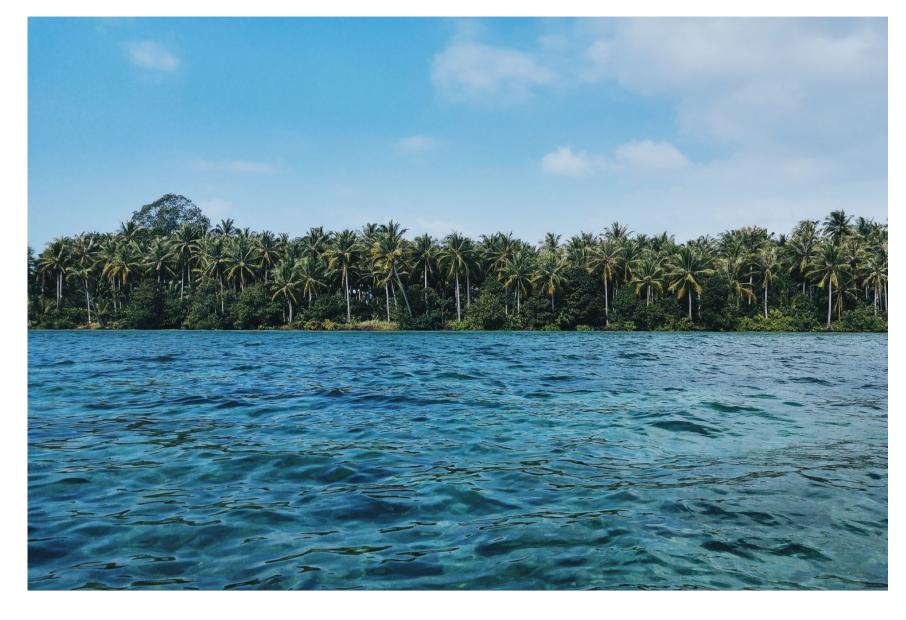


Photo by Fidelia Zheng

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A few months ago, I rode the elevator with a stranger who, in an effort to make small talk, mentioned the weather — with good reason, though — there had just been a major storm in New York City, where I live. I confessed I'd missed it because I was off enjoying the beautiful, warm weather in the Dominican Republic.

"Nice!" she said. "Punta Cana?"

"Nope," I responded, "Cabarete."

She shrugged. She'd only heard of Punta Cana - she thought that was where everyone went when they went to the DR. But luckily, she was wrong. This post is for the woman from the elevator, and, of course, for you.

Cabarete is on the north coast, just 12 miles away from the Puerto Plata Gregorio Luperon Airport, and it's a gem of a place if you're looking for an alternative to the typical allinclusive resort type of beach vacation. It's still in the DR so it has all the wonderful things you've come to expect from an island in the Caribbean, like pristine beaches, gorgeous sunsets, and cocktails that come "in fruit," meaning, a pineapple drink that comes in an actual pineapple, (which of course I had), but it's more sustainable living and chill vibes than buffets and watered-down rum and cokes.

If you're a surfer of any kind, you've likely heard of Cabarete
- this quirky beach town is known as the adventure-sports
capital of the country, specializing in kitesurfing,
windsurfing, and regular surfing, and it's also recognized for
its ecotourism. During my time there, I toured two organic
farms, an eco-friendly resort, and grabbed a snack at one of
the cutest organic smoothie and juice bars I've been to, maybe,
ever. If you come to Cabarete, here are a few must-dos below...
And if you don't have a trip planned yet, well, what are you
waiting for?

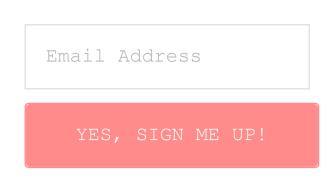


Photo by **@nickargires**

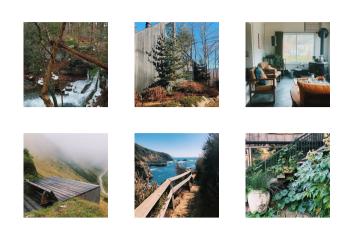
In my 20s, my idea of a good vacation involved a bustling city, rich nightlife, lots of glasses of wine, and some record shops.

Jesse Sposato

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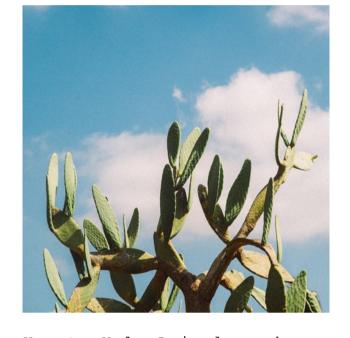


How to Eat and Kick it Like a Real Dominican in Santo



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In my 30s, waking up early and eating healthy rate higher on my list. Enter the Extreme Hotel, a 100% solar-powered, ecologically sustainable adventure and fitness hotel located on Kite Beach. The hotel has an aquaponic garden on the premises, the first I'd ever been to (or even heard of, if I'm being honest), a delicious restaurant where the arugula in your salad and the mint in your mojito is grown in said garden, or at the hotel's nearby farm (they started out growing fresh food for themselves and for the restaurant, but now have their produce in five supermarkets!), and activities galore.

This place is truly an adventurer's paradise, but you don't have to be an "adventurer" to enjoy it - it's really for anyone who likes to be active. In my short time there, I tried acroyoga for the first time, hung upside down from an aerial hoop at the hotel's circus (that's right), and visited Zendo Fitness, the on-site gym run by Zach, a Zen Buddhist, who described the place as "kind of a melting pot of fitness." Not to be missed are the mojitos from the hotel's farm-to-table restaurant, La Mesa Taina, that come with sustainable straws, for one, but are also served with magic berries (which I'd been wanting to try forever!) that make your drink taste sweet without any added sugar.

If you're interested in staying here (which I highly recommend), rooms start at \$59 a night during low season, and \$69 during high, plus an extra \$10 a night per additional person. (Note: The rates are for rooms only - you can add classes on à la carte or in packs of 10, or opt for one of the packages offered by the hotel.) Extreme is just about a mile away from Cabarete's town center, and to get there from here, you can take a motoconcho or public taxi for about 30-50 pesos (\$2-\$3) or a private taxi for 300-400 pesos (\$16-\$21); during the day, you can walk - it will take just about 20-30 minutes.

The Extreme Hotel is located on Kite Beach and it is *the* beach for kiteboarding and kitesurfing, though if you don't want to partake in these activities, it's also a great spot to simply watch the sky explode with slices of bright colors, i.e., the kitesurf sails. You can also come to Kite Beach to swim, chill, or stroll. Drift out of La Mesa Taina onto the beach, like I did, post-mojito, and feel all your anxieties melt away instantly.



Photo by Rohit Tandon

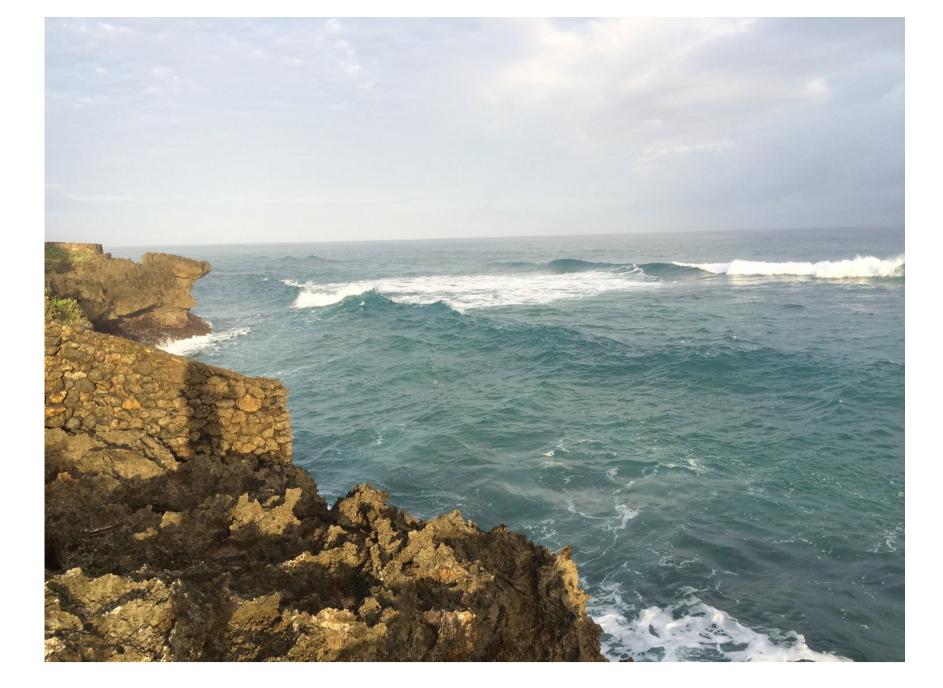
The center of downtown Cabarete is located along the main street, Calle Principal, which also runs along the beach, Playa Cabarete. The street is filled with shops and eateries, and along the beach side of it is a host of bars and restaurants right on the ocean. You won't want to miss Fresh Fresh Café, the organic smoothie and juice bar. This place is especially a dream come true for vegans and vegetarians, but really for anyone. With smoothies, bowls, and sandwiches this delicious, you'll be planning your days around trips to this spot. I recommend the "Bez Bowl" with quinoa, sautéed kale, roasted pumpkin, avocado, and more! (The Fresh Fresh franchise was first launched in Sosúa by wife and husband Anahid and Vatche Avakian, who are originally from Montreal, followed by this one in Cabarete, and then others in Altos de Chavón and Santo Domingo, as well.)

Walking along the main street, you'll find lots of shops to saunter into, many with varied treasures, but in my opinion, the cutest one is Bead It!, right next to Fresh Fresh. If you're on the hunt for the perfect souvenir, like organic soap that smells like you want to eat it, or feather earrings and friendship bracelets to remember your trip by, this is your spot.

Work up an appetite with a sunset stroll along the beach; and then head to dinner at La Casita De Papi, known for its delectable seafood. La Casita is one of several restaurants located along the beach, so the lovely atmosphere and beautiful view alone would make this a great place to dine, no matter what, but La Casita De Papi happens to be a stellar spot. The smell of garlic and butter wafting onto the beach will lure you here over all the others. It's most famous for its signature "a la papi" sauce, which is a secret, rich, dreamy concoction served over shrimp or langostinos (for the langostinos, wait

until May when they're in season) that lives up to the hype, as does the rest of the menu.

Here, I had ceviche and crab cakes that I've dreamt about since (the sign of a good meal), and saving the best for last, this is where I drank the aforementioned drink "in fruit," a beverage highlight. It was a piña colada that came in a pineapple filled to the brim and was strong and delicious and didn't leave me with a hangover the next day!



The Sea Horse Ranch embodies everything that comes to mind when you close your eyes and dream of vacation. It is a largely sustainable community with oceanfront villas to rent or buy. This 250-acre property is just outside of downtown Cabarete (just six and a half miles, or, a \$14 cab ride away), and so idyllic you might want to just spend your whole trip here. The villas themselves are all uniquely wonderful — the one I stayed at included a pool, a covered outdoor dining area, a porch, picturesque ocean views, a hot tub, and many bedrooms. You can rent three and four bedroom villas starting at \$700 a night during the low season (June to mid-December) and \$980 a night during the high (mid-December through May), and you can hire a breakfast chef for \$50 a day. These villas are perfect for big groups, friend reunions, and the like.

If you ever manage to leave your villa, amenities around the premises include: common-area seaside pools, tennis courts, an equestrian center where the particularly adorable horses have plenty of room to roam free, and an organic garden called Villa Orgánica run by gardener Carlos Juan Rodriguez (think: some of the most beautiful passion fruit, tomatoes, and purple cabbage you've ever seen). The garden hosts monthly full moon dinner parties prepared by chef Giselle Viñas — for just 500 pesos (\$28) per person (extra for beverages) — and markets that are open to the public three days a week.

There's a predominantly Mediterranean restaurant with fresh ingredients from the garden on the premises, as well, called The Beach Club. (The Beach Club is closed right now for renovations, but will reopen this summer, and it's brought to you from our favorite couple, none other than the founders of Fresh Fresh!) Though the restaurant was closed during my visit, I ate a special dinner prepared by Anahid and Giselle, with all produce locally grown at the on-site garden. It included several Beach Club dishes — the hummus and taboulé with homemade flat bread I can easily say was the best I've ever had, and pumpkin soup with coconut milk, ginger, and lemongrass that I've since tried to emulate, though so far haven't even come close.



After touring the Natura Cabana grounds and eating just one amazing meal here at the open-air, dinner-only restaurant, Natura Restaurant (there's another for breakfast and lunch, too), I did so much raving about this place to friends that a few actually listened and will be staying here later this month for a week! This 12-room eco-friendly hotel situated on a hidden beach is paradise for the environmentalist and regular person alike — the nightly rate for two people is \$230 including breakfast and tax.

Everything here is organic, from the sunscreen to the butter to the on-site garden (with almond trees, lettuces, peppers, herbs, and more). And if you're looking to have a mindful, relaxing trip, this place is for you as there's a meditation temple on the grounds, as well as yoga and Pilates classes. Plus, there's a coral room here built on an actual coral reef, and every two weeks, there are biodanza dance classes. #UnplugToRecharge is this spot's motto, and it's easy to see why.

As much as I was able to fit in during my stay here, there were so many other things I wanted to try. Just a few among them: Iguana Mama for adventure tours and excursions, Cabarete Coffee Company, Kite Club for kiteboarding lessons, and Kite Club Café, "home of the fish taco."

So now you know the DR has a lot of chill vibes to offer in Cabarte, and you can confidently tell all your friends and family to skip the usual all-inclusive weirdness of Punta Cana next time they ask you for some tips!

Jesse Sposato traveled to the Dominican Republic courtesy of the Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism. All opinions are her own.

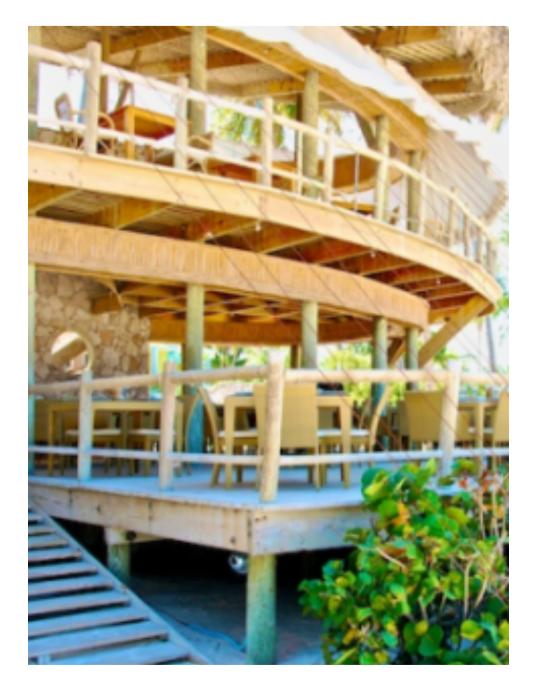
Follow Jesse and her travels on Instagram: @jessesposato

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Jesse Sposato

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Jellyfish Restaurant in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic

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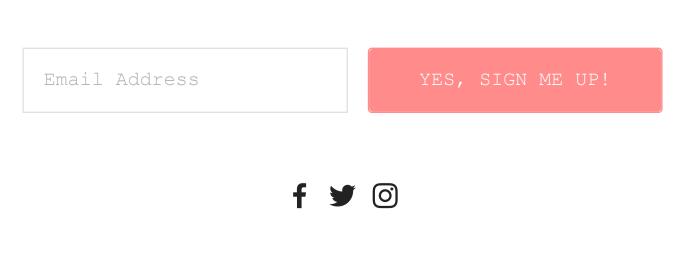


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