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Where the Wind Does the Work

By JUDY TONG

WENTY years ago, the Canadian windsurfer Jean Laporte was beach-hunting with a friend, driving along the north coast of the Dominican Republic. After a few hours, they pulled over at a sign for Playa Cabarete. Mr. Laporte sat on the bumper sipping a Presidente beer while his friend ambled through a thicket of cocoa trees and found a bay. He went back for Mr. Laporte and took him to a white beach with sand soft as cashmere, sloping into luke-warm water. Mr. Laporte tested the waters with a board and sail, and decided he had found perfect conditions for windsurfing.

Word about the spot spread quickly, and for years Canadians, Europeans and Australians have gone there to break their winter fasts. It is now considered one of the top spots in the world for windsurfing, as well as the newer sport of kiteboarding, which involves riding on a board while being pulled by a huge overhead kite.

Now the wind has carried the noise of Cabarete to the United States, where the small town had largely gone unnoticed by Americans, even though it is only a two-hour flight from Miami.

The town of Cabarete's atmosphere is all about a laid-back, tropical lifestyle revolving around sports, resting and partying. Young surfers start their day when the winds pick up just before noon and go into the late afternoon. After a full day on the water, they take a nap around 7 p.m. and dine around 9. After dinner, surfers and nonsurfers head over to a bar called Lax and swing in the rope chair hanging on the front porch while drinking mojitos or Cuba libres. Then they head down the beach to one of the dance halls blasting everything from Top 40 to salsa. After falling into bed just before the sun comes up, the surfers wake late and start all over again.

The draw for kiteboard and windsurfing enthusiasts is the yearlong steady winds and water conditions suited for both beginners and experts. The main kiteboarding beaches are Bozo Beach and, farther west, Kite Beach. They are not hard to find - just walk along the beach toward the line of giant, colorful kites hanging above the horizon. Windsurfers hit the water pretty much anywhere, and there are also several breaks down the beach for traditional surfers.

Sporting events, including the Cabarete Kiteboarding World Cup and the Red Bull Masters of the Ocean event, draw world-class riders, as well as thousands of spectators, to the town.

Finding a lesson or a place to rent and buy gear is simple, as many of the hotels and resorts are attached to schools and centers.

For a little variety, adventure tour operators in town, like Iguana Mama, (809) 571-0908, www.iguanamama.com, or Amber Coast Adventures, (809) 972-3065, ambercoastadventures.com, offer everything from cascading trips - where you use any means possible to climb up and slide down waterfalls - to hikes through nearby El Choco National Park to seaside yoga classes. But many prefer to just sit on the beach drinking Presidentes and margaritas.

Ever since Mr. Laporte first set board to water in Cabarete, it has been growing to accommodate the increasing number of visitors. But in the last few years there seems to have been a boom. Three new resorts have been built, and nearly all the hotels and resorts have undergone renovations, while new bars and restaurants are constantly cropping up along the main street.

Gabriele Krepp, the manager of Pequeño Refugio Hotel, said that when she first arrived from Germany over 10 years ago, Cabarete was a small village. "Then," she said, "there was the big bang of the all-inclusive resorts offering the Dominican Republic and also Cabarete for small money." A room for two at the hotel, (809) 571-0770, which opens this week after renovation, is \$50 to \$95, including breakfast buffet.

Aware that part of the draw of Cabarete is its small village feel, the local hoteliers and restaurateurs set up an association to preserve the town's flavor.

At the same time, the influx of foreigners doesn't necessarily alter Cabarete's secluded-paradise feel. Instead it is stirred by the presence of hundreds of expatriates who settle in Cabarete after visiting just once or twice, or "tourist locals" who stretch a two-week vacation to seven months.

A stay in Cabarete is very affordable. Both inexpensive bungalow hotels and all-inclusive resorts can be found beachside, though it seems a shame to stay behind a resort's walls. Vacationing there can be so cheap that it is possible to pay for an all-inclusive resort and still taste all the local delights.

Walking is the best way to get around since the main street is only about a half-mile long, but you can also hail a motoconcho, a taxi motorcycle that will take you anywhere in Cabarete for about 35 cents (10 pesos, at 30 pesos to the dollar) a person during the day and double that at night. Be aware, though, that no one wears helmets.

For longer trips - say to neighboring Sosua to snorkel around the reef's blue waters - jump on a guagua, a minibus that is identifiable by its loaf shape and sardine-packed passengers. A ride costs 70 cents. There are also taxis and rental cars, although the free-for-all driving style may not be for everybody.

Dining options are varied, in price as well as style. Satisfying meals can be as cheap as a couple dollars for a pizza at Pizza Via or as much as \$20 a person for a full restaurant dinner eaten while curling your toes in the sand on the beach.

The simplest culinary delight, though, is to buy a coconut from one of the women strolling the beach balancing a bowl of fruit on her head. With a large knife she will crack it open and cut it up in front of you, handing you pieces of the white flesh.

Ms. Krepp said that Cabarete was great for everybody who likes beaches, activities and what she calls "the easy-going."

"You do not have to windsurf or kitesurf," Ms. Krepp said, "to feel at home in Cabarete."