

STRANGERS ON THE SHORE

Digital ‘nomads’ reshape a Dominican beach town, cutting some locals out of the picture

Story and photos by Valerie Trapp



Cabarete's first cryptocurrency shop opened in December 2021.

Long before the Bitcoin & Crypto Shop moved in, the land belonged to a freed slave. Her dirt-floor house stood alone in an orange grove perched by a two-lane highway on the northern lip of the Dominican Republic. Ana María Sin's great-grandchildren will tell you that, on certain nights visiting her, they'd lie flat on the road to watch stars and hear waves. They'll tell you she lived to be 115. And with a respect so full of awe it slides into superstition, they'll tell you she *knew*.

Before the kitesurfers and expats and digital nomads found Cabarete, the woman with a curved back had said it: "One day, strange people from other countries are going to come here."

Now 70 years old, Lisandro Corniel Júma widens his eyes at his great-grandmother's foresight. "I don't know what vision she had. She was illiterate, but she would say this."

Since Covid-19 blurred the boundaries of home and work, people have arrived with laptops and yoga mats in growing numbers. These leisure travelers and digital nomads (a label some of them reject) are often younger than the expats whose migration is determined by corporate relocations or desires to extend pension checks. [Cabarete Digital Nomads](#), a private Facebook group emphasizing the beach town's "amazing lifestyle and surf vibe," has more than 1,000 members to date. Among them are freelancers and remote workers Zooming into companies thousands of miles away. A few manage the boutique hotels they opened while others teach beachfront yoga.

Drawn to Cabarete by its lower cost of living, reputation as a watersports haven and government policies that tend to favor the privileged, the nomads coalesce around a suspicion that – unlike their peers stuck in cubicles – an inherent adventurousness and nonconformity propel them into more meaningful, authentic and interesting lives.

As in other places in the Global South, from [Mexico City](#) to Puerto Rico to [Bali](#), an influx of remote workers has resulted in rising prices and local resistance. Flyers popped up around Mexico this summer reading, in English, "New to the city? Working remotely? You're a f—ing plague and the locals f—ing hate you. Leave." The rapper Bad Bunny's latest music video, "[El Apagón](#)," included a documentary-style news report on gentrification in Puerto Rico. It has garnered more than 7 million views. But Cabarete, home to [fewer than 15,000](#) people, has shapeshifted more than resisted in the past few years. With the crypto shop, a health food restaurant, a waffle café, a cycling studio and rows of foreign-owned hotels, its downtown has become more San Francisco, Calif., than San Francisco de Macoris.



Alejo Corniel Júma at his fruit stand.

The town is squeezed between a protected national park and the Atlantic Ocean and can only expand along its wingspan. Two neighborhoods primarily inhabited by Dominicans are receding on the mountain side, crushed against a natural lagoon as coastal developments

spread. On the beachfront side, a 360-degree spin on Ana María's old street corner will boomerang you into a present day that, for her descendants, is washed in the unsettled sheen of an alternate reality.

After Ana María died in 1970, most of her land was sold to Dominicans, then Spaniards and, more recently, Russians. The part of the property where Corniel Júma and his family reside was shaved down to a slim house formed of several consecutive rooms. Business happens below a gray tarp that arches from their roof to the highway. In the back, Corniel Júma and his wife, María, sell juices, smoothies and sandwiches from their kitchen over a checkerboard counter. In the front, by the road, his brother, Alejo, slashes coconuts for passing tourists. That is, of course, if anyone comes by.

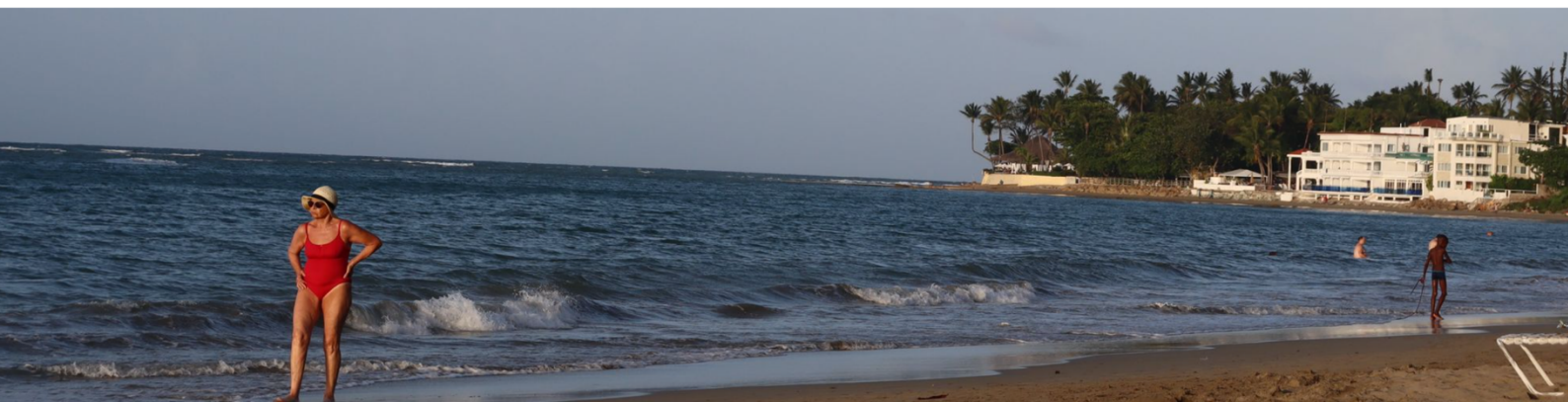
There's a lot of competition. Since the nomads arrived, many after stints in Southeast Asia, they've accelerated Cabarete's transformation into a kind of cosmopolitan small town that Odeth Serna, a local real estate agent, can reasonably endow with the slogan "campo living with a touch of city." Joe Troyen, a start-up founder from Vermont, proudly recounts a recent dinner party with no "single repeat country among 12 people."

"What 2020 has proven is that for some people, remote work works," says David Abraham, founder of Outpost, a company with four co-working and living communities in Southeast Asia. "What really, I think, we'll be fighting over for the next decade or so is who it works for and who it doesn't work for." In Cabarete, some protesters have mobilized against attempts at public [beach privatization](#). But as a coastal town in the [most visited country](#) in the Caribbean, any resentment is far more measured and often not voiced at all.

"All of us here live from tourism," says Alejo Corniel Júma, sitting under the tarp of his family's fruit stand. He points to the friends congregated next to him on plastic chairs and beer crates. "Him, he's a taxi driver. I'm here [selling fruit]. He's a motoconcho driver and also rents scooters. You see?"

A chorus of assent lifts around Alejo.

"From some medium or another, all of us live from tourism. So what can we do?"



Playa Cabarete is a tourist hotspot replete with bars, restaurants and kitesurf schools.

‘CREATED BY GOD FOR TOURISM’

In the 1960s, the Dominican Republic, like many Caribbean nations, started moving toward tourism as a way to generate economic development without making large investments in manufacturing and technology. Dominican politicians courted visitors to market the country as "democratic" after the end of Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship and to replace Cuba as a vacation spot for North Americans in the Caribbean.

"There was also a decline around that time in the price of sugar in the global market," says anthropologist Saudi García, an incoming professor at The New School in New York. "The government was really looking to replace a lot of income with tourism."

The country's first director of the National Tourism Bureau, Ángel Miolán, looked at the same pristine beaches and towering mountains that attract digital nomads today—and that Columbus once wrote of as “fertile for planting and for pasturage”—and decided they were “created by God for tourism.” Divine decree or not, the strategy has stuck. For the Dominican Republic, “tourism today represents what sugar was a century ago,” writes Amalia L. Cabezas, a media and cultural studies professor at the University of California Riverside. “[It’s] a monocrop controlled by foreigners and a few elites.”

The Cabarete coastline, crammed with foreign-owned hotels, is symptomatic of a greater trend in the developing world, in which [25 percent or less](#) of tourist expenditure stays in the host country. In a town ruled by the logic of trickle-down economics, it makes sense that locals often pray for the visitor season to come the way a farmer might pray for rain.

“On a good day, when God grants you luck, you come across a tourist who says, ‘Come, I’ll give you one thousand pesos to take me to Puerto Plata,’” says motorcycle taxi driver Omar Manuel Olivo. Like with any miracle, he concludes: “Things like that don’t happen every day.”



Olivo on a break between moto taxi clients.

Eight months ago, Olivo, a father with an easy openness and a centipede-like scar on his palm, was living in Callejón de la Loma, one of Cabarete's main neighborhoods inhabited by Dominicans. His landlord notified him that she'd be raising the rent by 1,300 pesos. Though it's illegal in the country to do this to an existing tenant, the landlord argued that she could do whatever she wanted because it was her house. Olivo was forced to try his luck one town away.

While he is focused on day-to-day survival, Cabarete is undergoing long-term change.

“Everywhere: *se vende, se vende, se vende*,” says Taïf van der Haar, a Dutch ex-recruiting manager who, after a vacation to the D.R., bought land with his wife to open the boutique hotel Kibayo. Speaking little Spanish, they asked themselves, “What does that mean?”

It's translated into skyrocketing prices. “Since the pandemic, gentrification has bred in a way that's very hard to measure,” says Moraima Capellán Pichardo, the founder of Cabarete Sostenible, a grassroots, Dominican-led NGO and community farm. “Even in the neighborhoods that were considered low-budget, or maybe ‘ghetto’ and ‘dangerous’ for some, now there's younger people—digital nomads, people who work remotely—moving there and hiking up prices, whether it's conscious or unconscious.”

Since everything in Cabarete is privately owned and has no rent control, she says, prices have “doubled in one year with no real reason except owners can do it.” When Capellán Pichardo was looking for a house last year, it cost \$350 per month. Now, the same place goes for \$700.

Mechi Annaís Estévez Cruz, a Dominican American writer and activist, has been observing and predicting Cabarete's gentrification since 2016. In a piece published online, Estévez Cruz wrote: “I see the scars of gentrification carved into our neighborhoods: restaurants and properties that block our access to our beaches, the supermarkets stocked with kale and organic free-range eggs... and I wonder where I will go next when my landlord decides tourists can pay more rent than me.”

In 2021, Estévez Cruz left the town.

Finding housing has become a nuisance for Dominicans, if not a nightmare. Some places, according to Capellán Pichardo, claim they don't do long-term rentals, only renting out to visitors who are willing to pay more—effectively pushing out Dominican families. In certain Facebook groups, Capellán Pichardo has witnessed blatant housing discrimination, with the owner of a unit recommending people don't allow Dominicans to rent because they are “untrustworthy.”

Yet, even if nomads eventually leave, says Capellán Pichardo, if they've stayed in Cabarete for a month, three months, or three years, it's the same scenario for Dominican renters: "If the prices go up... it's never going to go back down for a local or native."

This is the situation Olivo finds himself in. Unlike the Corniel Júma brothers, who inherited their house, Olivo has been renting after moving to the north coast from Santo Domingo six years ago. He came by himself, leaving his family, in search of the work and safety he was struggling to find in the capital.

He describes his new place as "not very suitable," though all he does there is shower, sleep and watch a little TV. At 4:30 a.m., it's time to wake up. He's in Cabarete before 5, in case he can catch some clients trying to make the early Caribe Tours bus to the Haitian border. He's out up to 13 ½ hours a day, calling it quits around 6 every evening. Olivo doesn't like to be out at night; nothing good happens then, he says. Plus, he likes to be back at home by 8 to watch his favorite telenovela, the Turkish romance "Hercai."

Some days, he doesn't even make it in time. He needs to stay in Cabarete, waiting on the street corner of Calle 4. He passes time with TikTok and the news, praying that God will bring a tourist, hoping they'll forego taxis for the pleasant breeze of a moto. After all, business has been slow. Olivo needs the money. On two consecutive days this July, he only made 730 pesos (around \$13)—less than two-fifths of what he needs to live.

This presents an asymmetry of Cabarete today: Though the number of digital nomads has increased over the past two years, spending on local businesses has not. It's in this new Cabarete, where nomads are happy to pay \$28 for a two-hour sound healing class, that Olivo is losing his moto. He can't make the biweekly payments.

Some people are quick to offer suggestions. "'Don't be a fool,'" he quotes their advice. "'Go to the beach. See if you find a gringa.'" Olivo shakes his head. "I'm not built for that," he says, looking away.

'THIS PLACE IS SPECIAL'



Troyen at his girlfriend's cycling studio/café.

2022 has been much kinder to Joe Troyen, who bought his dream home in March. "It's really easy to buy a house in the D.R.," he says with a shrug. "You just have to pay cash." Positioned halfway between Playa Encuentro and Kite Beach, the house has provided the scaffolding for an experience of Cabarete (often called "Cab" by nomads) that feels "like a summer camp for adults."

Like many new arrivals, Troyen, an ed-tech entrepreneur whose senatorial speech pattern is mostly forgiven by his Labrador boyishness, has kept extending his stay. Initially, he came with a plan to stay six months; yet, after falling in love with kitesurfing and folding himself into the expat community, he chose to stay three more.

"A lot of my friends back home... if they want to get together with friends, it has to be really planned," Troyen says. "Versus here, I see friends every day easily, casually, spontaneously."

Within the confines of Cabarete's small-town width, digital nomads can replicate a collegiate informality—a certain ease forgotten in the "rat race"—remapping the town into a campus centered around westernized restaurants and hotels.

But if nomads were merely escaping city life for a small-town feel, "they could have just gone somewhere in Oklahoma," says historian Elizabeth Manley, who teaches at Xavier University of Louisiana. Travel to islands in the Global South, she says, is often undergirded by a fantasy of reconnecting with nature—a primitive innocence untouched by "man." Yet nomads bring themselves wherever they go.

As more development occurs, Manley says, the imagined paradise increasingly disappears.

Salar Yazdjerdi, a former Uber employee born in Iran, built an app, Roam, for travelers who “live a life of adventure—and *complexity*.”

“My phone tells me I’ve been to 700 cities,” says Yazdjerdi, “but this place is special.” On any given week, nomads can join an entrepreneurship group or a sound healing class offered mostly in English. When the new moon awaits, so does a sacred sisterhood circle. Across many gatherings in Cabarete, an aching desire for belonging is tangled in string lights so that, at one July event, three separate men voice their intentions to open men’s healing centers.



Yazdjerdi logs onto a virtual meeting at Natura Cabana, a popular boutique hotel and spa.

Troyen, the Vermont transplant, still doesn’t consider the town “a hippie commune.” He says, “You don’t have to, like, change your identity and reinvent yourself to feel like you fit into this alternative lifestyle.”

At Gypsy Bowls, a restaurant across from his girlfriend’s new cycling studio and café, Troyen clutches a pendant popular among nomads made of larimar, a rare Dominican stone. “I got this cool necklace, and now I fit right in,” he says, laughing.

After his initial nine months, Troyen traveled to Colombia, Brazil and back to the U.S. “Everywhere I went, it was like: Okay, here’s the bar of Cabarete,” he says. “Can you beat Cabarete?” After seven months on the road, however, he called it quits. Nothing compared.

Troyen is now sure about one thing: He wants Cabarete to be his home, not his “home base.” Though he doesn’t plan to spend all his time in town, likely traveling a few months out of the year, he is eager to embrace a new Dominican identity. At the July event, Troyen gave a speech about his startup Go Pangea, and the MC introduced him as “Dominican Joe”—a play on a slang term for Dominican-descended New Yorkers. Troyen is neither from New York nor of Dominican descent.

“Some of them are just straight up stealing local history and culture,” says Capellán Pichardo. “They’re repackaging it and reselling it within their own social and economic groups.”

Others, like Kibayo co-founder van der Haar, hope to see more overlap between nomads and the local community. He plans to offer locals free or subsidized yoga classes at his boutique hotel, a space primarily geared toward travelers.

If Troyen hopes to be “Dominican Joe,” however, he’s in luck, for under the administration of President Luis Abinader, the Dominican identity continues to be far more malleable toward white tourists than its primarily Black and Brown inhabitants.

In 2021, while digital nomads were starting businesses in Cabarete, more than 31,000 people in the Dominican Republic were deported to Haiti. Among them, according to [The Associated Press](#), were Haitians who crossed into the D.R., Haitians with expired work permits, Dominicans born to Haitian parents but denied citizenship—even Black Dominicans born to Dominican parents whom authorities mistook for Haitians. Last February, Abinader, who was sworn into office in the presence of then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, began a new project. He’s building a 244-mile [wall](#) along the Haitian border.

Nomads, on the other hand, face few restrictions in the Dominican Republic. Citizens from many countries, particularly in North America and Europe, can enter without a visa for up to 30 days. After that, they pay only a modest fee when leaving the country. In terms of buying land, as van der Haar has learned,

all you need is “money and a passport.” And, recently, President Abinader’s lax Covid restrictions—meant to encourage tourism—have even turned Cabarete into a small anti-vax hub.

Jay Jay, an Austrian singer-dancer whose favorite talking points include the “plandemic” (a term used by Covid conspiracy theorists) and his stint in a regional German production of *Hair*, has attended three events with fellow “political refugees” at the house of an undisclosed “Mr. T.” About 20 to 30 like-minded people, who chose the Dominican Republic due to easy visa requirements, meet there to eat lunch and discuss future challenges. They have high hopes for their chances in the D.R., says Jay Jay, adjusting his Ganesha ring, Māori necklace and hair feather. It is, after all, an “island small enough to not be too important for the globalists, maybe.”

These folks might be finding leisure or shelter in Cabarete, yet once visitors stay longer term, the nonreciprocity of the tourist exchange becomes even more stark. As University of Denver media, film and journalism studies professor Erika Polson writes, what a digital nomad’s location independence really means is the spending of foreign-earned income in a less expensive country where one does not pay local taxes. In the popular book “[The 4-Hour Work Week](#),” Tim Ferris advocates for this strategy, calling it “geoarbitrage.”



Jay Jay chose to travel to the Dominican Republic to avoid Austria’s strict COVID-19 policies.

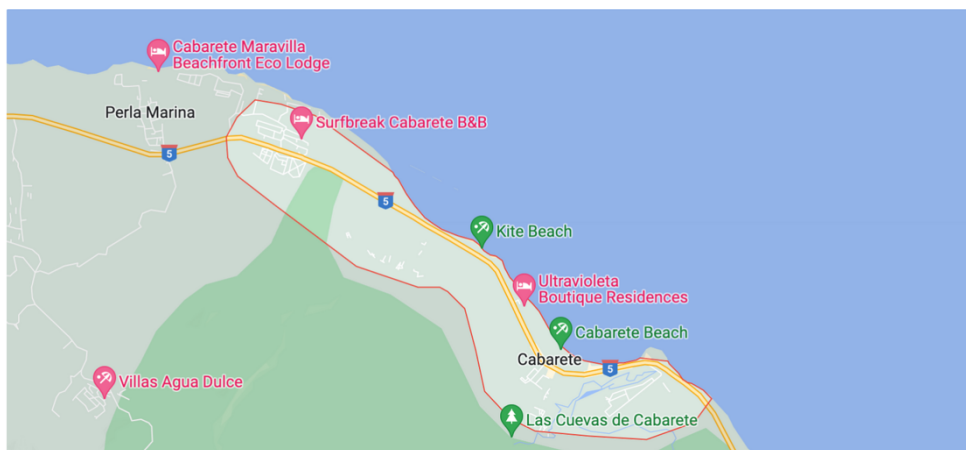
In this sense, Polson continues, location-independent people can enjoy *location welcome* — “the status of having access to every place”—while the service workers who attend to them remain perpetually fixed, poor, *located*. Without necessarily contributing to the community, paying taxes, or attaining documentation, nomads can stay indefinitely, and without impunity, in the Dominican Republic.

Troyen hopes to apply for Dominican residency. “So I don’t have to pay every time I leave the country,” he adds with a bashful smile.

Halfway through the July event, rain fell. Some nomads remained in the open green, dancing at the edge of the lagoon. A woman under a cabana thanked the Earth for abundance, while vendors found shelter for their art, food and paints. When the sky cleared, a bachata band started playing. For a while people danced until they stopped. Late into the night, nomads circled under a glow of string lights and cicadas, drinking cocktails and networking, as a [band of Dominican children](#) sang in the corner, mostly out of sight.

‘ALL REVOLUTIONS ARE BASED ON LAND’

The issue with land is that, unlike love or insecurity, there is, necessarily, scarcity. This is particularly true in Cabarete.



Map of Cabarete.

“Cabarete is an arm,” explains Tricia Suriel, the founder of the nonprofit Mariposa Foundation DR, holding out her own. “Here’s the ocean, and here’s the lagoon.”

The land between is quickly being snatched up by foreign developers. To the east, as well as in Cabarete’s

center, the Ocean Club Group is developing three hotels, including a W and a Ritz-Carlton Reserve. (The projects are mired in legal battles, having received [significant backlash](#) for trying to cut down vital mangrove reserves, violating the Dominican constitution that prevents building within 60 meters of the shore, and planning construction of seven-story buildings, where only three stories are allowed by local law.) To the west, a luxury resort is planning to expand.

Meanwhile, locals spent much of 2021 in court contesting an attempt to [privatize](#) Playa Encuentro, eventually winning the case. “They cut my umbilical cord there,” says moto driver Jose Castaño, who was born in the Encuentro area. “A company is going to privatize where I was born, so I can’t go into where I was born? Tell me.”



The Maritime Zone, measuring 60 meters from the high tide mark, is public property under Dominican law.

As tourism development progresses, so do calls for increased Dominican land autonomy. Foreign direct investment remains a preferred internal metric of the Dominican Republic’s success under the Abinader administration, which prides itself on a predicted [\\$3 billion](#) in foreign investment this year. What the dollar signs don’t show, says Silvio-Torres Saillant, an English professor at Syracuse University, is that tourism development rarely “contributes to the enhancement of social relations.” Jobs created are often in the service sector, paying locals a “Dominican wage” and keeping towns like Cabarete in systemic poverty.

“The Dominican population is taught to aspire for foreign investment above their own people,” says Capellán Pichardo. Seeing mostly short-term, she says, the average person affected by mass development and beach privatizations can’t anticipate the long-term effects: “They’re losing access to their own country.”

Ysanet Batista Vargas, a Dominican American activist and founder of the worker-owned cooperative [Woke Foods](#), organized a “Politics in Our Food” event this summer on the topic. In a wooden outdoor restaurant shared with Cabarete Sostenible, a dozen community members gathered for a panel discussion. Later, Batista Vargas would express disappointment that none of the foreigners who love Woke Foods chose to come.

Flower-filled moka pots and Presidente beer bottles brightened the tabletops. Behind a pink hammock, the sun set over the community garden, as attendees tucked into a vegan *pastelón*. Quoting Malcolm X’s “Message to the Grass Roots,” García, The New School anthropologist who came to Cabarete to moderate the discussion, began with words that jumpstarted the room: “All revolutions are based on land.”

A catchphrase quickly emerged from the panel of activists, permaculture farmers and professors. “Without food and land sovereignty,” the panelists concluded, “there is no autonomy.” This lack of sovereignty underlines the unmet basic needs that have rocked the Cabarete community during the past few years. Reliant on imports for both domestic consumption and the tourism sector, the pandemic and Russia’s

war in Ukraine have plunged the Dominican Republic into a food crisis in which, as the World Bank [reports](#), the country experienced food price increases of over 5 percent every month between March 2021 to March 2022.

Capellán Pichardo's Cabarete Sostenible was created to give food aid to those most in need; according to a [survey](#) of 220 homes, the grassroots organization found that, as of April 2021, the average Cabarete resident doesn't have more than two to three days' worth of food at home.

"They have put tourism like the panacea of the Dominican Republic," Paola Estévez, an organizer with the youth-led collective [Barrio Alante](#), told the audience. "What's the phrase?" she asked, recalling an expression. "*De afuera vendrán, y de tu casa te echarán.*" Translation: From outside they will come, and they'll kick you out of your house.

At the end of the panel, Batista Vargas took the mic. "In Cabarete, there's a cognitive dissonance," she said. This event was the first time people talked about the truth, she claimed. On some days, she just wants to leave. Witnessing the relentless inequity takes a toll. But still, she said, she doesn't believe Cabarete is lost.

For both Capellán Pichardo and Batista Vargas, an ideal Cabarete is characterized, first and foremost, by a reclamation by Dominicans of their land and themselves. Batista Vargas envisions a future in which locals give themselves importance. She imagines a Cabarete in which the beach is not just a place of work but a space to be enjoyed. The 60 meters of protected beachfront, in Capellán Pichardo's vision, are returned to the public. Across the country, she says, Dominicans commit to recovering and taking care of their natural resources "instead of being so eager to sell them off to the highest bidder."

This future also requires a turn from tourism-dependency to true autonomy, says Torres-Saillant, who advocates for "public policy that does not commit blindly to anything that is presented to us as advancement."

Until then, the shrunken real estate of Ana María Sin's descendants features a *For Sale* sign hanging above the bananas. The Bitcoin & Crypto Shop attends to its turnstile of European and North American clients. Caught between desire, entitlement and responsibility, the main artery of Cabarete chugs on.

Though she can't know what downtown Cabarete will look like in five years, let alone 50, Batista Vargas knows one thing. In an alternate reality, "People understand they are visitors. They know that this is not theirs."



The property retained by Ana María Sin's descendants is now for sale.