

When Tourism Erases Instead of Elevating

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Written by: *Mechi Annaís Estévez Cruz*

This article was originally published in the author’s website [unavainabienspanish.com](#)

I recently saw a **promotional tourism video** aimed at taking viewers through a virtual tour of the five major regions of the Dominican Republic. The video, like the DR, “has it all”—sweeping, panoramic views; crystalline waters and white sand; smiling white tourists...everything except for Dominicans (putting the last few minutes aside for a moment). In the flashes we see of local people—smiling, overly starched waiters or boat drivers, they are relegated to roles of servitude; they are literally shoved into the background. This absence, this erasure, is symbolic—a symptom of a much larger **issue with the way tourism functions in the Dominican Republic**.

We are obliterated, removed, everything about us is sterilized and tucked out of view to make way for tourism. Rumours circulate about local people being displaced from their land to build a port for the cruise ships in Maimon; Dominicans are denied access both physically (illegally) and economically to their own beaches and the restaurants or hotels that line them. And through it all, we are told we must be grateful for this erasure and lack of ownership because we owe our livelihoods to it. It is a fact that more “developed” **nations curb tourism; limit construction with strict zoning laws**; remind visitors that while they are welcome, their land is for residents first and tourists second; and **that they believe locals are a key part of the charm for tourists**. Even though there are countries in the “third world” who continue to strive to keep land and businesses in local hands, this is not the message behind a campaign that overwhelmingly shows beaches, forests, but rarely a local face. This erasure tells us that even in our own country, the story is simply not about us.

Although we should never be treated like a spectacle, like animals in their natural habitat to be gawked at and photographed, *we exist*; we are an integral part of this country and deserve to be at the forefront of any narratives told about it. Now, fast forward to the first and only time we see Dominicans for more than a split second. The scene starts with four Dominican men playing dominoes on the street. A white woman walks by and with a smile inserts herself just long enough to play a piece for one of the men before walking away. This action is symptomatic of that greater issue—the fact that so much of the Dominican Republic’s touristic areas don’t belong to us and instead exist solely for the entertainment and consumption of foreigners. And they often feel entitled to it, because they’ve been told that that’s okay, **here and in other tourist destinations**.

It wasn’t just that in real life this would have elicited a much different response—I would never let anyone put their hands in my domino game—it was the absolute lack of regard shown in that moment. One would never dream of simply walking into a game and inserting themselves, this shows an utter lack of respect for personal space, the game, and the players. A domino game in the Dominican Republic is a sight to behold, but in this script the tourist wasn’t content with being a passive spectator, she *had* to participate, centring the moment around her. She takes ownership of that game for the second that she’s in it. So even in the one scene with Dominican people in it, it’s still not about us. How can we hope to encourage tourism that respects this nation’s autonomy, agency, sovereignty, and its people when even the campaigns subliminally tell viewers that we don’t matter?

That’s why **socially responsible travel** is so important. Sustainable tourism aims to centre narratives around local people and their cultures, where they should be. It encourages this idea that our spaces should first and foremost be for and by us, secondly for visitors. That *we* are the sole owners of our stories, and should be given the platforms to tell them. A proper virtual tour of the island would have shown viewers that we also go to the beach when we aren’t barred access to them; that we are not only servers, we are also owners; and that even when people serve they’re not part of the background, they are a key element to making experiences enjoyable and are worthy of respect. It would have elevated Dominican voices, not erased them. It would have shown that Dominican people are not extras or props in foreign people’s vacations, we, too, have and deserve leading roles.

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Mechi Annaís Estévez Cruz

Mechi is an Afro-indigenous, queer Dominicana. Oriunda de Nueva York, she moved "back" to the Dominican Republic where she now resides permanently. She is a writer, a language teacher, a community organizer, and an activist. Mechi feels passionately about decolonizing travel, discussing diasporic privilege, and dismantling systems of oppression. After moving to Cabarete, she was so dismayed by the lack of knowledge of ethical travel practices, the treatment of local Cabaretenses by foreigners and diasporic Dominicans, and the realization that tourism can never be sustainable, that she launched her business Una Vaina Bien Spanish to use language instruction as a vehicle for teaching ethical travel tips to visitors to try to mitigate the negative impacts.

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