Punta Cana serves as a break from the cold

By Brianna Wallen
Editor-in-Chief

Turning 21 is already a big deal but celebrating it in another country is even better. From Nov. 11–15, my family and friends surprised me with a birthday trip to Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.

Ringing in a new decade of adulthood with my toes in the sand, singing Disney songs overseas and getting covered in mud on an ATV. Four days in paradise gave me plenty of stories to bring back home.

We stayed at Bahia Principe Explore, a massive all-inclusive resort. Getting around required hopping on a trolley, and even then, there was plenty left to explore.

After landing, we kicked off the trip at a karaoke bar, singing Disney songs and getting into vacation mode. There is something magical about singing "Gotta Go My Own Way" with your family and friends in front of strangers that brings people together.

The following morning was my birthday, so we headed to the resort's Nacar International Cuisine Buffet for breakfast. It quickly became one of our regular stops. The breakfast selection was one of my favorite parts, with freshly made omelets, waffles and crepes. The workers were also incredibly welcoming, often greeting guests with smiles and birthday wishes. Their hospitality made the experience even better.

One piece of advice I would give anyone planning a trip to the Dominican Republic is to learn at least a little Spanish beforehand.

Of course, no trip to Punta Cana would be complete without spending time at the beach. The waves were much stronger than I expected, but the water was warm and refreshing. The resort also had several pools with lively music and plenty of activities. From pool Zumba to beach parties and nighttime fire dancing, the resort made sure there was always something happening throughout the day.

While breakfast and lunch at the buffet were enjoyable, dinner was a different story. I would give it a 5 out of 10. The restaurant offered a variety of dishes inspired by American and Asian cuisines, but nothing particularly stood out to me. Most nights, I found myself going back for Hawaiian pizza and fries.

Thankfully, the resort had another option that quickly became a favorite: La Isla food truck. Open for nearly 24 hours, it served burgers, fries and empanadas. After spending hours at the beach or pool, it was the perfect place to grab something to eat, especially after a late night out.

For my actual birthday dinner, we decided to venture outside the resort and visit Jellyfish Restaurant. The food was a 10 out of 10, as they had a variety of seafood to choose from.

Sleep was not on the itinerary for this trip. The next day we had an excursion at 11 a.m. sharp. We booked through Viator: an ATV and buggy adventure that included stops at Macao Cave and Macao Beach. I would rate the experience a 9 out of 10, although I might have given it a perfect score if I had not come back covered in mud.

Within seconds of starting the ride, I drove straight through a deep muddy puddle. There was constantly mud splashing everywhere. Despite that, riding through the countryside was one of the most exciting parts of the trip.

Our tour guide, Simpson, was incredibly friendly and made the experience even more enjoyable. We eventually reached Macao Cave, a beautiful natural attraction with water about 25 feet deep. The scenery was stunning, but as someone who is not the strongest swimmer, I decided to admire it from the sidelines rather than jump in.



PHOTO | BRIANNA WALLEN

Macao Beach in Punta Cana.

Macao Beach, however, was the perfect final stop. After the muddy adventure, I ran into the water to wash off. The beach was beautiful, and it gave us a chance to relax before heading back.

Workers were coming around the resort to advertise multiple excursions for a discounted price. There are also multiple photo ops, as I got to take a picture with two vibrant parrots: Julian and Romero.

By the time Nov. 15 arrived, I was nowhere near ready to leave. Four days felt like nowhere near enough time to experience everything Punta Cana had to offer. Between the welcoming workers, beach days, and unexpected adventures, the trip gave me more than just a birthday celebration.

If there is one thing I took away from this trip, it is that sometimes the best birthday gift is the opportunity to experience something new. Punta Cana, you gave me sunshine, adventure, laughter and memories I will carry with me long after the tan fades.

¡Hasta la próxima, Punta Cana!

Not every holiday favorite belongs in a can

By Lily Rand
Photo Editor

Few brands have earned my loyalty the way Alani Nu has.

Since the company launched in 2018, Alani has been my go-to energy drink. As someone who does not drink coffee, an energy drink is often my caffeine fix throughout the day.

Alani consistently delivers flavors that are fun, creative and easy to enjoy.

My younger sister and I are such fans that trying new Alani flavors has become our thing. Whenever one of us finds a new release, we buy an extra can for the other. Sometimes we even wait until we are together to try it for the first time.

I have gone store-hopping in search of limited-edition flavors before, hoping to find them before they sell out.

That is why I was excited when I saw this year's Winter Wonderland flavor. To be fair, the can itself almost sold me immediately.

One thing Alani consistently does well is packaging. The Winter Wonderland can is festive, colorful and everything a holiday release should be.

I have also always enjoyed that some Alani flavors are hinted at through the can design rather than clearly spelled out on the front. It makes trying a new flavor feel a little more exciting.

The reveal this year was Sugar Cookie.

The irony is that sugar cookies are my favorite cookies. If Alani Nu was ever going to create a flavor specifically for me, this should have been it.

It was not.

After only a few sips, I knew something was off. The flavor was so strong that it reminded me of opening every spice in a spice cabinet at once and taking a sip of the smell.

Cinnamon? Nutmeg? Ginger? Yes. All of them. At the same time.

I made it about halfway through the can before admitting defeat.

What made the experience even more disappointing is that unusual flavors can work.

In fact, my favorite Alani flavor is Sherbet Swirl. An orange sherbet-inspired energy drink sounds like it should taste terrible, yet it somehow captures the flavor perfectly.

Sugar Cookie was the opposite.

It felt like Alani was trying so hard to recreate a holiday dessert that it forgot one important detail; people still have to drink it.

The previous Winter Wonderland flavor, with its cranberry notes, was strong too, but it still felt refreshing. The new version replaces that balance with a flavor that, at least for me, was simply too much.

To Alani Nu's credit, I appreciate the effort. Limited-edition flavors keep consumers interested, and not every release is going to be a winner for everyone.



PHOTO | LILY RAND

Alani Nu Winter Wonderland can.

One disappointing flavor is not enough to make me stop buying Alani.

After years of releases I have enjoyed, this one simply joins the short list of flavors I would not purchase again.

Still, some holiday traditions are worth sticking to.

This year's Winter Wonderland flavor proves that while holiday nostalgia can inspire great ideas, not all of those ideas need to become energy drinks.

Some things are better left on the dessert tray.

Christmas comes too early

By Valentina Toro
Managing Editor

November is not even over, yet Christmas decorations are already everywhere. Stores are filled with ornaments, Christmas trees and holiday gifts, while Christmas music plays in the background. It almost feels like people have forgotten that Thanksgiving has not even happened yet.

Christmas is one of the most anticipated holidays of the year, but that does not mean celebrations need to begin before November is over.

Every year, businesses seem to introduce Christmas decorations earlier, leaving little room for people to enjoy the last weeks of fall.

Walking into stores during November has become a reminder that Christmas is approaching rather than an opportunity to enjoy the current season. Thanksgiving decorations are becoming harder to find, while entire aisles are dedicated to Christmas merchandise.

Retailers are partly responsible for this. By introducing holiday products weeks in advance, businesses encourage customers to start shopping earlier.

Christmas has become more than a holiday celebration. It is also a major shopping season, and companies are taking advantage of every opportunity to promote their products.

However, November deserves just as much attention. Thanksgiving gives families and friends an opportunity to spend time together, enjoy traditional meals and appreciate the people around them.

Although not everyone celebrates Thanksgiving, it remains an important part of the month for many.

Instead of focusing on the holiday that is approaching, people should be able to enjoy the one that is right in front of them.

Social media has also contributed to how early Christmas celebrations begin. By the first weeks of November, videos of decorated homes, Christmas shopping and holiday activities are already circulating online.

While there is nothing wrong with sharing excitement for the season, it creates the impression that November is simply a waiting period before December.

Christmas music is another part of the problem. Hearing holiday songs throughout November takes away some of the excitement that usually comes with December.

Songs that are supposed to make the holiday season feel special become repetitive when they are played for weeks before Christmas.

Of course, decorating early is something many people enjoy.

For some, Christmas brings happiness and memories of spending time with family.Others prefer to prepare ahead of time because December can become busy with work, school and other responsibilities.

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