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'Voluntourism' In The Dominican Republic

By [Mark Dagostino](#) | Wednesday, December 23, 2009 1:06 PM ET

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With the hundreds of press releases we see here everyday at Tonic, it's not often a single word is enough to catch our attention. But this one sure does: "Voluntourism."

First, it's kinda fun to say. Second, in this case, it spotlights a really cool first-of-its-kind program offered to guests at the luxurious, eco-friendly [Puntacana Resort & Club](#) in the Dominican Republic this holiday travel season. And third? It's just the kind of thing we'd love to see more of in the travel world.

From December 28 through January 2, guests at both [Tortuga Bay](#) and The [Puntacana Hotel](#) will be invited to participate in the island's annual bird count with renowned ornithologist Dr. André Dhondt. In between wiling away hours at the spa or kicking back in an Oscar de la Renta-designed villa, groups of 10 will have the opportunity to don binoculars and field guides and head into the resort's nature preserve to help conduct the yearly census, focused on 27 indigenous bird species native only to the Dominican Republic.

This isn't just some trip to the zoo. The count is a crucial method used to monitor and protect the health of the island's unique birdlife. And the guide, André Dhondt, is the Edwin H. Morgens Professor of Ornithology at Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology—a man who obtained his Ph.D. in his native Belgium and studied birds in Europe, Africa, North and South America and the Pacific before turning his attention to the Dominican Republic in 2000.

For the type of traveler (like me!) who gets bored after a couple of days lounging around the pool, what could be better? And what could be more fun than to learn about the environment in an area you've come to enjoy, while actually getting a chance to do something important for that environment at the same time?



Since it's inception in 1969, Puntacana has focused on sustainable expansion and protecting the natural environment that its guests come to enjoy. The launch of this "voluntourism" component, though, is a new way to get guests involved directly with the enjoyment of that sustainability.

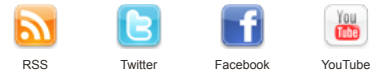
"People think of eco-tourism as tents and backpacks," the resort's Executive Director of Hospitality Alberto Abreu notes in the release. But Puntacana is so chic, back in 1997 both Julio Inglesias and De La Renta himself became investors and made their homes on the 26-square-mile property. (You just *know* those guys aren't roughing it!) Instead, Abreu notes, "The launch of these voluntourism packages means that guests can relax and enjoy their vacation while also helping us take care of a beautiful natural environment."

In the past year alone, the resort picked up three major awards reflective of its 40 years of good practices: The World Tourism and Travel Council "Tourism for Tomorrow" award in the category of Destination Stewardship; the "Clean Development" prize for Central America and the Caribbean for its



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integrated solid waste management program by the Central Committee for Environment and Development (CCAD); and the Condé Nast Traveler "World Saver's Award" for its education programs.

Good for them. And good for all of us.



Photos Courtesy [Puntacana Resort & Club](#)

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