



# A New Place In the Sun

*Luxury resorts, championship golf courses and Asian spas are helping to turn the Dominican Republic into the latest five-star playground of the Caribbean.*

BY SETH KUGEL

Head down, follow through: Playing one of the 15 designer golf courses in the Dominican Republic.

I WAKE up in my golden-yellow Oscar de la Renta-decorated, \$650-a-night villa, throw off the 350-thread-count sheets, and pad over to open the balcony doors. In floods the Caribbean sunlight, nothing but a long-fronded palm and a patch of manicured grass between me and the sugary sand beach, which gives way to water a shade of aquamarine that I thought had existed only in Crayola boxes. It's as if I had woken up in a travel brochure... or a Corona commercial. But really, it's just morning in Tortuga Bay, the new luxury resort on the eastern tip of the Dominican Republic.

My old friend Jon is also up, already fantasizing about his golf game on the Pete Dye-designed oceanfront course (and, yes, there's the seventh hole, jutting out into the sea just to my left). It's a significant change from his dusty jaunts through the public courses of eastern Massachusetts.

Meanwhile, I am preparing myself for the salt-scrubbing, Oriental-massaging experience of a \$247 Energizing Day Package at the Six Senses Spa, the high-end Asian chain previously only available at destinations like Phuket and the Maldives, where it takes a \$247 massage just to recover from your 20-plus hour flight. (Tortuga Bay is just a three-and-a-half-hour flight from John F. Kennedy Airport in New York.)

But first, breakfast. Sure, just pressing "2" on our direct-to-butler cell phone would summon a feast to the aforementioned bal-

cony, but we're guys who prefer the high-end gluttony of the breakfast buffet combined with made-to-order omelets and pancakes at the poolside Bamboo Restaurant. It's just a two-minute walk away. (Still, we take our golf cart.)

Just another day in paradise.

But great as Tortuga Bay might sound (and some service glitches over the course of our stay made me question just how great it was), this resort, with 50 suites in 15 villas, is just one of a number of high-end getaways that are beginning to call the Dominican Republic home. The Sanctuary Cap Cana, a boutique hotel with eight restaurants within a larger \$500 million development, has a low-key opening scheduled for Feb. 1; before then, Jack Nicklaus will be flying in to open one of his Signature golf courses, with nine of the holes on the water. Farther up the east coast, through picturesque hills and small towns, the Sivory resort, with its 55 terra-cotta-colored suites built into jungle-worthy vegetation (lushness reduced near the suites to avoid bugs) — some right on the beach with their own private plunge pools — is gearing up for its first full winter season.

Time was the Dominican Republic was famous for its bargain getaways: \$1,000 for a flight-included, all-inclusive resort where the food was passable, the drinks strong and the merengue music festive. (Actually, that time was only a year or two ago, and the bargains are still there.) But the country is increasingly becoming the five-star playground of the Caribbean, pulling in tourists

that might otherwise have gone to Jamaica, Puerto Rico or St. Thomas and gearing up to give the glamorous spots of Anguilla, St. Bart's and Turks and Caicos a run for their money.

As the winter season approaches, the Dominican Republic has all but been anointed with "it-destination" status by celebrities, travel magazines and tour operators. It's estimated that four million people will visit the country this year. That's more than double the 1.9 million that came in 1996. And though Canadians and Europeans were the traditional visitors, Americans are fast taking over.

With thousands of pricey hotel rooms and luxury second homes planned for the next decade, and paparazzi-drawing celebrities like the Clintons, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Julio Iglesias, Vin Diesel and Brad Pitt popping in for work or play or both, this is only the beginning. The Roco Ki real estate venture will open the Westin Roco Ki Beach and Golf Resort in Punta Cana in winter 2007, and is planning at least seven high-end hotels, in a resort that gives a nod to the Taíno Indians who lived on the island before Columbus arrived. (It financed an archaeological dig on its land before beginning construction and is considering opening a museum nearby with the findings.) It is also a residential community: there was \$100 million in sales the day those homes went on the market in April 2005, according to Nick Tawil Fernandez, the chief executive officer.

Cap Cana has about 30,000 acres south of Tortuga Bay, and villas are on sale from

\$750,000; in addition to the Sanctuary Cap Cana, its marina, whose debut is this December, will eventually have 1,000 slips. And it's not just on the east coast that all this action is taking place: in Samaná, the paradisiacal peninsula on the north coast visited by humpback whales, the Gran Bahía Principe chain is opening no less than four five-star hotels for the winter season.

And there is much near-virgin beach still being scoured: Fernando Rainieri, a former tourism secretary and the brother of the Punta Cana pioneer Frank Rainieri, is part of a group of Dominican investors that includes the wealthy Najri family, that bought some beachfront land in 1997 in Miches, the largely undeveloped area between the resorts of Samaná and Punta Cana. They've recently been negotiating with a group of American and Canadian investors. (Howard Kerzner, whose company owns the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas and many others, recently died in a helicopter crash on his way to scout out land in the north.)

How did a country that three decades ago few people considered a beach destination become such an A-list destination?

**BEACHES** The hundreds of miles of sandy shore, much of it seemingly typecast for the role of Paradise, beats every other Caribbean nation but Cuba for length; especially on the east end, the fine white sand and turquoise waters match up for quality as well.

**GOLF** Fazio, Nicklaus, Dye, they've all been there, designed that. (There are more than 20 designer golf courses in use or

planned.)

**FLIGHTS** With five international air taking in more than a dozen daily jet flights from New York City and direct ice being offered from an ever-increasing number of other American cities, it's a get there. A contributing factor: York's enormous Dominican immigrant community flies back and forth regularly creating year-round demand and increasing options.

**THE COCOON EFFECT** Tourism in the Dominican Republic has long been all give. And although many of the new end resorts are not, they do provide some kind of get-away-from-it-all escape travelers in escape mode are looking for.

**POOR INFRASTRUCTURE** The Dominican Republic's notoriously bad (and marked) roads, dysfunctional power and dubious water system had a hand driving the all-inclusive culture by making it necessary for resort owners to provide self-sustaining community and thus a disincentive to explore the otherwise idyllic island, home to everything merengue to Christopher Columbus' settlement in the New World.

**BASEBALL** As Dominican baseball stars like Pedro Martínez, Sammy Sosa, Manny Ramírez and Albert Pujols's household names in the United States the last decade, their country of origin, too.

**CELEBRITIES** It's hard to imagine.

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