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how to spend it

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PLAYAS OF THE CARIBBEAN

High-profile investors, a pristine stretch of tropical beach and two very different hotels – something seductive is happening on the north coast of the Dominican Republic. **Maria Shollenbarger** investigates, and gets a first look at Aman's newest resort



Here are some of the words that tend to be bandied about in the description of Playa Grande, on the north coast of the Dominican Republic: *Communal, Bohemian, Passion project, Barefoot chic*. Also – in a much-read and commented-on 2006 New Yorker article that chronicled the acquisition of this 2,200-acre site by the New York-based asset manager Ravenel Boykin Curry IV (known as Boykin) and a coterie of high-profile

investors – *utopian*. The profile was fairly arch in its description of Curry, his privileged background, his investors (who are also friends in the elite stratum of American society in which he travels) and what were depicted as his lofty intentions for Playa Grande, but the author couldn't really manage to be ungenerous about the place itself. Comprising low bluffs and mountains carpeted in thick primary jungle and a chain of eminently photogenic beaches, including a mile-long

one (pictured below) from which the site takes its name, all overlooking a preternaturally blue stretch of the Caribbean, it is lushly, undeniably beautiful, and – glorious, this – still nearly empty of humanity.

In the more than a decade since Curry's consortium purchased the site from the Dominican Republic's central bank for about \$50m, plans for various components of Playa Grande have gone through multiple permutations. They always featured a Robert Trent Jones Sr-designed championship golf course, already on the site (it had been built in 1995-97); they also always had some 20-25 plots of various sizes along the big beach and at the bases of the hills behind it, allocated to the investors ("homeowners", in the Playa Grande literature) – a varied group that includes architect Richard Meier, CNN host and *Washington Post* columnist Fareed Zakaria, private-investment firm CEO Jonathan Soros, fashion designer Lela Rose, public-television host and pundit Charlie Rose (unrelated), former Fortress Investment head Michael Novogratz, and actress Mariska Hargitay (of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* fame). And there was always going to be an ultra-luxury resort, abutting the golf course and

Main image: view of Playa Grande beach from Amanera. Inset: a casita terrace at Amanera



From top: a living room in a Playa Grande Beach Club bungalow. Kitesurfing offered by Amanera. The Playa Grande Beach Club main house

more aesthetically different from Amanera if two architects had been mandated to expressly design them to be. While Curry's vision always allowed for attention-getting luxury accommodation (in 2007 developers Dolphin Capital – owners of Amanzoe, on Greece's Peloponnese peninsula – became involved, and Curry personally invited then-chairman of Aman Resorts Adrian Zecha to the site around the same time), it's unclear whether he saw himself as an actual hotelier. Yet that's what he became in late 2014, when he and his wife, the interior designer Celerie Kemble, invited several friends down to stay the week at the retreat she had created at the eastern edge of the beach. For a year, this retreat functioned as a place to which shareholders could come on holiday, or to which they could refer friends, to enjoy the property. Its nine whitewashed, extravagantly filigreed bungalows (six of them one-bedroom, the other three with three bedrooms each, example pictured left) are scattered amid copses of mangrove and palms, around a central two-storey house – the clubhouse, in effect, with a great room, dining room, library, upstairs cigar-and-rum bar and a pool flanked by cabanas. Only in the past couple of months has Playa Grande Beach Club opened to outside guests and its promotion as a luxury



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commanding kingly views eastward all the way to the neighbouring, smaller beach called Playa Preciosa. More altruistically – if also a bit nebulously – there was a spirit of philanthropy, of custodianship, permeating the intentions of all involved for whatever would eventually be created. Buying in was, so to speak, buying in.

Cut to 2016, and the Playa Grande vision has begun to truly coalesce, putting this place on the still-untrammeled north coast of a country with a reputation for being very trammelled indeed back into the spotlight. The golf course (pictured overleaf) has been redesigned by Trent Jones Sr's son, Rees Jones, to accommodate the construction of Amanera, the second Aman resort in the Caribbean and the first integrated golf resort in its portfolio, which officially opened on December 15 after a test run during the Thanksgiving holiday. Its 25 ultra-contemporary casitas (pictured on previous pages) are built into a naturally occurring amphitheatre just below the aforementioned bluff, cascading gently in rows down to the beach, where an open-air restaurant and beach club (manned by four cabana boys who are also trained lifeguards: the currents in this beautiful water, particularly in winter, can be serious) offer lobster and red-snapper tiraditos, kale salads, mojitos and service at a smattering of loungers in

the tawny sand. This month, ground is at long last due to be broken on a handful of Playa Grande homeowners' residences. They will vary in style, according to the whims of their owners, but none will have a footprint covering more than 50 per cent of its allocated lot, nor will construction be allowed above the canopy; and every plan must be submitted to a community board for review. (Yes, even Meier's.)

These houses, once completed (provisionally by the end of this year), will be part of the rental pool of what's come to be known as Playa Grande Beach Club – also the name of the site's second hotel, which could not be



boutique hotel quietly begun. Another six treehouse-like accommodations, smilingly referred to here as "jungalows", are to be constructed this spring.

If Curry was the mind and force behind the Playa Grande mission statement, as it were (the acquisition, the investment structure), Kemble is the one who has taken its vision statement – the ethos that is difficult to put into words without sounding either a bit self-reverential or a bit naïve (see *passion project, utopian*) – and articulated it brilliantly in bricks and mortar... and pastel paints, and rattan and sisal, and handmade ceramic floor tiles, and copper bathtubs and a multitude of other place-perfect materials and motifs. In the main lounge – its sofas and tables a

riotous overlay of ikat and vintage wicker Peacock chairs painted in sorbet hues, the mirrors framed in seashells – there is a water dispenser on the bar, slices of watermelon and cucumber mixed in with the ice cubes and multicoloured glasses stacked beside it. It's a subtle, but meaningful signifier to guests of just what sort of luxury is being espoused here. "I've always found one of the most important things design can do is tell people how to behave," Kemble notes. "If you succeed at it, you create an environment that steers, or subtly changes, people's demeanour; people will know how to appreciate what you're offering." Thanks to Kemble's estimable

Clockwise from right: a casita's terrace and private pool at Amanera. A casita interior. The Robert Trent Jones Sr-created golf course at Amanera

talents, Playa Grande gives very good steer. The staff are not legion, and they are not lightning-fast to respond, but they are lovely, and consistent presences throughout; first-name greetings, maternal pats on arms and prescient drinks service are, by the second day, second nature. A collared shirt in the dining room for supper is a no-brainer; it's just that kind of place. But equally, so is shoes-free living all day; so is eschewing lunch in the dining room to sit in the sand and eat fried fish prepared in the shade of a palapa by a local surfer's mother (the local communities are encouraged to operate small food and drink concessions on the beach). While you can certainly meander over to the dining room at 7am to have your coffee served to you, you can also brew your own – pack down the cafetière in your bungalow's open-air kitchen with the excellent Juncalito coffee in the fridge and repair to the iron table on your wide patio to enjoy it – or stroll to one of the many paths that wind underneath the canopy, kept company by one of the gentle, genial local dogs (fed by staff and regularly checked by vets); or sit at the edge of the pool, feet in the water, watching the sun hit the shaggy emerald tops of the tall coco palms on the mountain behind. "The last thing I wanted was for this place to feel heavy," says



Hike the steep hills behind the beach, ticking off an Eden's worth of flora and fauna, and from the summit gaze down on two perfectly seamed ribbons of jungle and sand, bookended by cliffs and rocks



Kemble. "It's meant to be alive – to have a lightness and motion to the feeling of being at home here."

At the other end of the beach, things are both the same and very different. After a journey of fits and starts that has lasted some eight years and traversed more than one iterative redesign, Amanera has come to full fruition; in its assertively contemporary, clean-lined splendour, it's an improbably effective counterpoint to the more-is-more good taste on display at Playa Grande. Amanera's public spaces sit at the very edge of the 100ft bluff, enveloping what has to be one of the Caribbean's better panoramas in a cantilevered, timber, glass and steel embrace. The prevailing aesthetic suggests tropical midcentury, with some very subtle nods to local vernacular; the island's famous handmade ceramic tiles, which at Playa Grande Beach Club cover the floors in explosions of equatorial

colour, are here pulled back to ultra-subtle gradations of ice blue and grey. The casitas are minimalist well beyond the point of understatement, and there is what currently feels like a slight excess of severity (the bedrooms in particular are all – truly, all – stone, concrete and timber). The idea of brilliant architect John Heah, however, is that this will be tempered within a year by landscaping that will literally flourish around each casita's sunken outdoor dining area, each carefully planted bathroom courtyard, and even each roof, as well as the 10m private pools of those that have them.

While Amanera has immaculate sightlines and staff everywhere to cater to all needs (though probably not patting any arms maternally), it manages to channel a surprising amount of the warmth that's on display at Playa Grande Beach Club. Its guests are even



encouraged to stroll down to Playa Grande for supper, or to grab tostones from a beach vendor for lunch (Playa Grande also sends guests up to drink and dine at the Aman, where the wine lists and menus are more sophisticated). As at the Beach Club, Aman guests can commandeer a motorboat and captain from nearby Laguna Gri-Gri, a freshwater spring that rolls in a stream to the sea via a lush mangrove forest, and then putter along the surrounding coastline, exploring limestone grottoes and pitching up for a picnic lunch and some sunbathing on tiny, serene Playa Caletón. They can also hike the steep hills behind the beach with a naturalist, ticking off an Eden's worth of native flora and fauna, and from the summit gaze down on two perfectly seamed ribbons of jungle and sand, bookended by cliffs and rocks and forming a natural, gently curving smile – as prime a piece of real estate as it was 600-odd years ago, when the native Taino people made their homes at the tree line's edge, and now reimagined as another sort of home, extending a very 21st-century sort of welcome. ♦

DOMINICAN-DO ATTITUDE

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **Amanera** (0800-2255 2626; www.amanera.com), room only from \$1,216, and **Playa Grande Beach Club** (+1809-589 2070; www.playagrandebeachclub.com), from \$1,024. **British Airways** (0344-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies twice daily to Miami, from £928 return, with onward travel to Santo Domingo on American Airlines.