

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

CONDÉ NAST

JANUARY 2016

Traveler

Get Down

(UNDER)

DESTINATION
2016
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AUSTRALIA

Word of Mouth

The things we can't stop talking about



We Found
Your
Next Winter
Escape



JANUARY 2016 / CONDE NAST TRAVELER 37



An aerial view of Punta Preciosa, part of the Playa Grande Beach Club.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The Converted

A new beach club resort turns a D.R. critic into a believer.

I'D ONLY VISITED the Dominican Republic twice, but that's all it took for me to swear off an entire country. How could I possibly hate a place bounded by such cerulean waters? Easy. The hotels I stayed at were either enormous resorts catering to sunburned frat boys with free-drink wristbands or way too mom-and-pop (think two adults sharing a twin bed in a room off the owner's kitchen). Once, things got so bad that my husband and I drove to Haiti for a change of scenery.

Of course, it wasn't *all* terrible. There was an otherworldly ten-mile stretch of beach along the remote northern shore that had the best surf breaks in the country and dense stands of royal palms growing almost to the waterline. Sure enough, New York-based interior designer Celerie Kemble and money manager Boykin Curry saw the potential in this Edenic coastline. After persuading some of their famous friends—Charlie Rose, Mariska Hargitay—to go in on a 2,000-acre parcel of land, they built the **Playa Grande Beach Club**, an intimate nine-bungalow resort that

opened in November. Perhaps, I thought, that old third-time adage would prevail.

The moment I stepped inside the hotel's light-filled clubhouse (which doubles as lobby, bar, and dining room), I was handed an ice-cold mojito. Shuttered doors leading to a sweeping wraparound porch were thrown open, dissolving any boundaries between indoors and out. I wandered the property, sipping a second mojito while coveting the high-back wicker chairs, ikat pillows and throws, and pink and green tile floors—all assembled in Kemble's high-WASP style that's best described as Palm Beach by way of Bali.

Most of the furniture and light fixtures are made on the island, and the architecture faithfully references the D.R.'s lacy Victorian-era gingerbread buildings with their lattice woodwork and pastel doors. But these aren't the only elements that ground the place in the Dominican Republic: Nearly all the staff are from nearby towns (some are enrolled in a resort-funded literacy program). And though the restaurant has exactly the kind of food you want to eat in 85-degree weather (poached eggs and avocado on multigrain toast, granola and homemade yogurt with local honey), you merely have to walk to the beach for a more authentic Dominican meal. Here, you'll find a marketplace that the owners spent \$2 million building for the food and crafts vendors who'd operated on the beach for decades.

As I sat by the sea, washing down tostones with a frosty Presidente from one of the vendors, I thought about how a great hotel can change the way you see an entire country. But I didn't philosophize long. I was too busy thinking about when I could feasibly get back here.

—REBECCA MISNER

Tip Sheet

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Puerto Plata's small Gregorio Luperón International (JetBlue has daily nonstops from New York). The Playa Grande Beach Club can arrange for a taxi to pick you up for the hour-and-20-minute drive to the resort.

THE DAY-TRIP TO TAKE

If you do pry yourself away from the resort's gorgeous tree-lined beach, we suggest heading to **Laguna Gri-Gri**, in the nearby town of Rio San Juan (a ten-minute taxi ride away). Here, you can hire a boat and a guide to ferry you through the mangrove-dense lagoon and out into the open ocean. Bring a snorkel and a mask—the guide will stop at yellow-coral reefs if you ask.

HEAD OUT FOR DINNER

For excellent Dominican food, check out **El Babunuco Bar and Restaurant**, in the nearby town of Cabrera. Order the lobster and the *pulpo creole* (octopus in a spicy tomato sauce). And be sure to try Mama Juana—rum, red wine, and honey infused with herbs and tree bark.