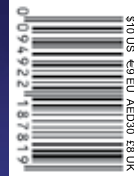


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LU  Meg Connolly Communications

Mi casa, su casa

From the heritage charm of Santo Domingo to bohemian coastal hideouts in the north, the Dominican Republic has island allure in spades, writes Michelle Wranik-Hicks – and sybaritic design lovers will feel right at home too



The meticulously restored houses and rooms at Casas del XVI incorporate elements of 16th-century architectural designs, with luxurious amenities, butlers and individually assigned guest iPhones (above). Vintage maps in Casas del XVI's Casa de los Mapas house adds to the historic charm (opposite top). The UNESCO World Heritage city of Santo Domingo is crammed with historical sites such as the Cathedral of Santa Maria la Menor (opposite bottom). A view from one of Amanera's casitas to the Atlantic Ocean (previous spread).



In the cobbled laneways of Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo's historic colonial town, life has not so much as slowed down as come to a complete stop. In the leafy square of Parque Colón, *capitaleños* (the city's residents) are slouched on benches beneath the trees, fanning themselves with newspapers. The fortified walls of Dominican Republic's historic city barely allow a wisp of breeze through the streets and I can do little but slump at a café cradling a melting gelato, tempted to order a bottle of ice-cold Presidente beer the way locals do: "*vestida de novia*" which, amusingly, translates to "dressed as a bride".

At night, the colonial zone murmurs back to life. Couples stroll arm-in-arm to dine at open terrace-restaurants in the squares or along the

oceanfront El Malecón promenade. Respite is also found behind the cool, stone walls of Casas del XVI. With *aguayo*-tiled floors and high-beamed ceilings, the gorgeously appointed boutique hotel is set across three Spanish Colonial-style mansions that date back to the 16th century, and for a bowerbird it's a dream, with each filled with all manner of curios from horn-handled magnifying glasses and sculptures to antique exploration maps.

From the moment I arrive, the Small Luxury Hotels of the World property strives to please. A *mayordomo* (butler) appears and my luggage vanishes. No need to bother with the filling in of forms; that can be done tomorrow. Why not pause in the courtyard for a cocktail? Within moments, there's a Cuba Libre in my hand. Another moment

“THE HOTEL IS SET ACROSS THREE SPANISH COLONIAL-STYLE MANSIONS THAT DATE BACK TO THE 16TH CENTURY”

later, there's a waiter laying out an impeccable dinner served beneath the mango trees and the stars.

That night, I fall asleep to the sound of rain thundering from the heavens, and wake to a brilliant Caribbean sky the following morning. I fling open the doors of my suite to the courtyard, where breakfast is served in three acts: *El inicio* (the beginning), *primer paso* (first step) and *platos principales*, the fresh eggs and tropical fruit arriving with the constant pouring of Dominican coffee. Ubiquitous throughout the country, Dominicans are serious about their brew, and many start to drink coffee before the age of 10 – a concept that would make most parents shudder.

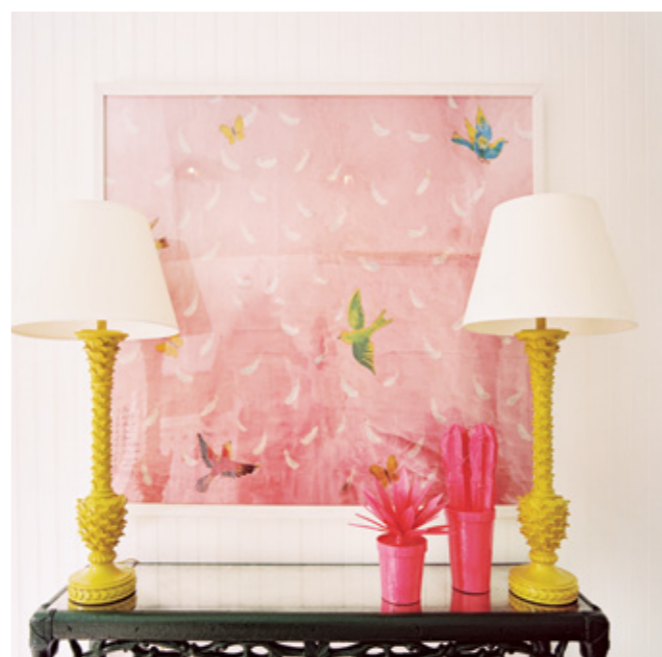
Coffee fuelled and armed with a courtesy iPhone pre-programmed with the concierge's

number in case we get lost or need advice, there's a surprising amount to see in the UNESCO World Heritage protected city, including some of the oldest buildings in the New World – the first hospital, the first university and the first Catholic cathedral in the Americas, along with museums that detail the 30-year dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo and conquistador-era Alcázar de Colón, the former palace of Diego Colón, the son of Christopher Columbus.

Though if we're being entirely honest, most travellers headed to the Dominican are less interested in history and more interested in drinking daiquiris on wildly beautiful beaches, smoking cigars, and dancing to merengue bands until dawn. Less than four hours from New York and Miami, it's no surprise to learn

that the Dominican Republic is the Caribbean's most-visited island. It's also no surprise to learn Penelope Cruz, Jake Gyllenhaal, Uma Thurman, and Julio Iglesias are just some of the celebrity identities known to have snapped up properties along its Caribbean coastline, yet until recently, the offerings for the luxury traveller were limited to the all-inclusive kind at Punta Cana, a resort-laden beach town on the country's east coast. Now, those seeking a more discreet, exclusive option can head north where a stretch of secluded Atlantic coastline – possibly the country's most beautiful – has not yet captured the spotlight.

The road to the northern swaths of the Dominican from Santo Domingo winds first through golden plateaus of farmland and cattle ranches and then through mountainous terrain



Playa Grande Beach Club guests have a 1.6-kilometre stretch of beach – mostly to themselves – footsteps from their bungalows (above). Opposite page, clockwise from top: Cabanas and manicured lawns line the Playa Grande Beach Club pool; the shutters on the bungalows can be opened up to the gardens for the ultimate indoor-outdoor living; Kemble's interior design elements incorporate pastel hues and offbeat collectibles; the Great Room at the Club House, where guests can take meals or drinks is marked by a seashell-studded arch; a cabana change room is styled with beach days in mind

followed by pot-holed coastal streets where rum shacks line the sands and vendors sell fried fish. Once you hit the stretch leading to Playa Grande, however, things start to become more manicured.

There is no sign for Playa Grande Beach Club, which hints to its exclusivity, but beyond the dense gardens and security gate lies a veritable Eden: a chic hideaway created by interior designer Celerie Kemble and her husband, money manager Boykin Curry. The story behind it is deliciously intriguing. When the New York couple heard the 2000-acre patch of land in the Dominican, fronting a 1.6 kilometre golden beach, was for sale, they concocted a wild scheme to buy it, managing to persuade friends from their well-heeled circle (among them, CNN host Fareed Zakaria, *Law & Order* actress Mariska Hargitay and musician Moby) to invest in the creation of an exotic hideout; Curry describing it as his Mosquito Coast fantasy.

It took Kemble 10 years to finish her creation, but the result is unlike anything you've seen before. Even if you're not remotely into interior

design, staying at Playa Grande Beach Club will make you passionately covet a peacock chair, daydream about bohemian 1960s garden parties, and fantasise about living in one of the nine bungalows, which are a fusion of French Colonial style, with louvred shutters, gingerbread trims and pale-green corrugated roofs. Our bungalow is mint-hued with macaron accents – shades that Kemble calls “faded bathing-suit colours” – with a wrap-around porch with a hammock. A colossal copper bathtub stands sentinel in the bathroom, where I emerge smelling of lime and coconut, the result of locally made Jabonitos amenities, created in nearby Las Terrenas.

The Great Room in the club house is even more eye pleasing, filled with Kemble's vintage, whimsical finds, peacock chairs and Dominican Colonial elements such as cut-out lattice woodwork and handmade *aguayo* tiles on the floor. It's Caribbean-meets-Palm-Beach, down-the-rabbit-hole madcap, yet somehow, as with all great interior design, it all works beautifully to create a captivating space in which to take

breakfast, read a book or sup a cocktail at the seashell-studded bar, which overlooks a pool surrounded by putting-green lawns.

Mornings on the beach at Playa Grande are pinch-yourself. The waters of the gin-clear Atlantic roll at the shore and there's not a soul wandering the sands. Instead, dogs with gentle eyes lay in the shade of palm trees that bow as though posing for a postcard. To my delight one morning, a friendly brown pup joins me as I jog the length of the sands.

Idle time is spent wandering between gardens dotted with almond trees and frangipani, and concrete statues of sheep and lions scattered on the lawns. Lunch is taken on the porch of the club house, where octopus carpaccio, caprese salads and grilled parrotfish with red beans and rice is served before desserts like *majareta*, a sweet ice cream made with freshly grated corn off the cob.

Afternoons? Well, you can pick a chair in the library and flick through books about Caribbean style, play board games, or take your fresh passionfruit juice, which is abundant in the

PHOTOS: Michelle Wrantik-Hicks / Stephanie Smith / Patrick Cline / Irene Mikellis



A two-bedroom Bay View Casa at Amanera features an ocean-facing infinity pool (above left); Playa Grande beach is fringed by virgin jungle (above, top right); a view into an Amanera casita living room (above right).

Dominican, by the pool. There are kids' toys in the cabanas, board games in the library, and it's perfectly acceptable to pad about barefoot and make yourself at home. In fact, it's expected.

Further along the sands to the public portion of the beach, there's a surf shack, and Kemble and her gang have created pastel-coloured cabanas for beach vendors to sell their wares. What's nice about this stretch of beach is the chance to mingle with local Dominicans taking an afternoon dip, or vendors like Ricardo, who will lop the top off a coconut with his machete for you, and urge you to stay for feet-in-the-sand *pescado frito* and piña coladas served in pineapple husks – which is so very island.

When you tire of piña coladas or swimming (what's wrong with you?) there is horse-riding through the jungle coastline and surfing. You can watch Dominican cigars being hand-rolled only a short drive east to Cabrera, while in the other direction, the laid-back, beachside Cabarete is rapidly gaining love from the global kite-surfing community. And then there is golf. The Dominican Republic has 26 courses, and one of the best happens to be located at Playa Grande, at the recently opened Amanera resort.



A man dries Dominican tobacco for hand-rolled cigars (above); Atlantic Ocean views and water features at Amanera's Casa Grande (top)

Like Playa Grande Beach Club, there is also no signpost marking Amanera – simply a mysteriously minimal gate staffed by security. Once through, there is no formal check-in; guests are simply greeted with the Aman signature: “Welcome home”, and are whisked by buggy to a private casita where they are instructed to relax immediately.

“You don't achieve elegance by ‘gussying’ things up,” once said Aman founder Adrian Zecha and glancing around, I can appreciate the sentiment. In contrast to the riotous bohemian flair of Playa Grande Beach Club, John Heah, the Hong Kong-born, London-based architect has swathed Amanera's casitas with a minimal aesthetic, melding luxury with functionality. Exposed concrete walls have unfinished surfaces, stone and grey upholstery abounds, and teak doors slide noiselessly, dividing the living area from the bedroom and bathroom, where a rainshower faces floor-to-ceiling glass windows that back onto a tropical garden. Lutron controls close blackout blinds. Outside, a 10-metre infinity pool glistens in the sunshine, overlooking the Atlantic.

Design denizens may end up spending much of their time circling the expanse of Heah's masterpiece, Casa Grande, with jaws agape. Clinging to the 20

metre-high cliff, the sleek cantilevered glass, concrete and Indonesian teak structure houses a lobby, main restaurant, library and a bar overlooking the expansive infinity pool, with silencing views of the ocean, jungle and golf course, and infinity-edge waterways at every turn. Aman's legendary service (there's a reason guests call themselves “Amanjunkies”) prevails, the Dominican staff add authenticity and the cuisine at dinner is excellent, from snapper *en papillote* served in a banana leaf and steak tartare.

The wind at these heights is often wild – I note some of the palm trees around Casa Grande are chained down – and could wreak havoc for golfers tackling the adjacent course designed by Robert Trent Jones as the “Pebble Beach of the Caribbean” (and later redesigned by his son, Rees), though none would complain about the views. With wide fairways that cling to the bluffs, 10 of the 18 holes have knee-wobbling views over the crashing surf below. Even for non-players, Amanera can set up a sundowner picnic on the 17th hole where “the sunset is out of this world,” according to our waiter. I'm just as happy to take a seat at the Casa Grande bar; stocked with locally made hand-rolled cigars, fine whiskies and B&B Italia chairs facing the panorama, it's the ideal perch to watch Playa

Grande's colours morph from morning sapphires to evening purple.

As fire lanterns are lit and the wind picks up, sending ripples across the infinity pool, I sit with a cocktail, watching the ocean and studying the curve of the beach meeting the jungle where days before, I drank piña coladas on plastic chairs in the sand. Suddenly, I notice a tiny brown speck in the distance make its way along the shoreline – and I smile. It's the Playa Grande Beach Club dog, accompanying someone taking a sunset walk along the beach. ☺

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