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The Dominican Republic's Most Luxurious Resort



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By John Brodie
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The laid-back glamour of PuntaCana, the Dominican Republic's poshest spot.

One doesn't need to be a golfer to appreciate the views on the 18th hole at PuntaCana's new Tom Fazio-designed course. Dotted with fuchsia-colored bougainvillea, the 500-yard dogleg-to-the-right is perched dramatically atop ocean cliffs. Standing at the tee, high above the seaspray, takes your breath away. For those lucky enough to play here, the panorama makes for an unforgettable final hole.

The only imperfection in this spectacularly manicured vista is a crumbling ruin of a stone wall I notice in the distance. Frank Elias Rainieri, the 33-year-old son of the resort's founder, explains that when his father opened PuntaCana with just four rooms in the early 1970s, "there was no airport, no infrastructure, nothing. So he tried to make money any way he could, and the ruin is all that is left of one of his schemes—a salt factory for evaporating seawater."

Frank Rainieri Sr. failed at making salt but succeeded in transforming this strip of coast into one of the Dominican Republic's most stylish destinations. There was a time when if you told those in the know you were headed to the DR, they would say, "Have fun at Casa de Campo." But thanks to six miles of sugar-fine beaches and a nearby airport that allows New Yorkers to be tanning by lunchtime, PuntaCana has become a hot spot among the BYOV (Bring Your Own Vilebrequin) crowd. Not as glitzy as St. Barth's, not as Brit-sy as Mustique, PuntaCana appeals to laid-back jet-setters as well as to celebrities, from Charlize Theron and Gabriel Byrne to the Clintons, looking to keep a low profile. In Corales, an enclave of private mansions that is PuntaCana's answer to Palm Beach's South Ocean Drive or Southampton's estate section, Oscar de la Renta, Julio Iglesias and Mikhail Baryshnikov have all built seaside villas. And yet, as interior designer Bunny Williams, who with her husband, antiques dealer John Rosselli, owns a Palladian-style plantation house in Corales, notes, "If you want to see movers and shakers, this is probably not the place for you."

Their home and many others in Corales can be rented—the most exclusive (and expensive) accommodations at PuntaCana. There's also Tortuga Bay, the resort's high-end boutique hotel with 15 lemon-colored villas offering an intimate setting and customized service, and the 186-room PuntaCana Hotel, which is a great family-friendly option. In addition, the 15,000-acre grounds are home to a nature preserve and two more golf courses, both by P. B. Dye, the second of which opens this summer, bolstering PuntaCana's status as one of the Caribbean's top golfing destinations. It's hard to believe that little more than a generation ago, all this was jungle.

Behind every great resort there is a visionary. At PuntaCana, that was Frank Rainieri. The resort got its start in 1969, when Rainieri, now 65, was a 24-year-old Dominican entrepreneur with a crop-dusting business. Those were boom years on Wall Street, and Ted Kheel, the high-powered labor lawyer who died last fall, had no trouble raising \$25,000 a head from 20 friends to buy the tract of coast that became PuntaCana. How hard could it be to make something of this place? The DR was primed to be the next big thing: At the same Manhattan dinner parties that Kheel's investors frequented, Gulf + Western's crazy-like-a-fox owner, Charlie Bluhdorn, was talking up Casa de Campo, a resort he was building a few hours east of Santo

Domingo.

But Kheel and his fellow investors hadn't really thought about infrastructure, and after a few false starts, Kheel asked Rainieri, an adviser on the project, to fly to New York and explain the challenges. "Here I was, this Dominican kid, walking into a Park Avenue skyscraper to meet with a group of prominent New Yorkers, and it had been months without any progress," recalls Rainieri. "So I talked to them with the kind of nerve that only a twenty-four-year-old has."

After laying out a smart, simple plan, Rainieri left with a deal for \$1,000 a month in cash and part-ownership. Sanguine about the future, he proposed to his girlfriend. "She boarded a plane to go to New York to buy her wedding dress, and that was the last time I saw her," he says. Her plane crashed. The despondent Rainieri went into isolation, living in a hut. But he continued working, and by 1971 he'd built a road and enough cottages to open a small hotel, the Punta Cana Club. Soon afterward Rainieri married Haydee Kuret, a Dominican beauty queen turned physics professor, and three children, Paola, Francesca and Frank Elias, followed.

A big turning point came in 1981, when Club Med, which was building a resort nearby, agreed to help finance the construction of a privately owned airport. Opened three years later, it became a major selling point for the area and a cash cow for Rainieri and his partners. Today the Punta Cana International Airport serves four million passengers annually. It's also a big reason why the Punta Cana name has been adopted by so many nearby resorts. To distinguish themselves, Rainieri and his partners switched to the single word "Puntacana" in 2004.

Over the last three decades, Rainieri has led the resort through a gradual expansion, starting with the Puntacana Hotel in 1979, followed by the first residential developments in 2000 and, finally, the Tortuga Bay Hotel, designed by Oscar de la Renta, in 2006. Home sites in Corales and elsewhere on the property are still available for purchase, and the resort's master plan calls for two new inland communities: one built around the new P. B. Dye golf course, the other around a future equestrian center. While the growth has been decidedly upscale, Puntacana remains refreshingly low-key, without the social chutes and ladders one finds in similar spots.

Last fall my wife and I stayed at the Tortuga Bay villas, where rates during high season range from \$790 for a junior suite to \$3,280 for a four-bedroom oceanfront villa. We had the upper half of a two-unit villa, and despite being on top of our neighbors, there was plenty of privacy. Our view was of a perfectly groomed lawn leading down to the beach. The de la Renta decor in the villas is neither too preppy nor too cool-mod: the floors are Coralina stone; the walls are white and hung with botanical prints; the wood-and-rattan furniture is made by local artisans. The service is Johnny-on-the-spot, thanks to the guest cell phone that connects to your villa's manager, who can book tee times, make restaurant reservations or fix the Jacuzzi at a moment's notice. Each villa comes with its own golf cart, which is handy when you want to zip the half-mile north, past a few golf holes and through a palm forest, to the Six Senses Spa. Tortuga Bay has its own restaurant and bar, but both are quiet poolside affairs, perfect for breakfast or for honeymooners.

The 186-room Puntacana Hotel, which underwent renovations three years ago, is a short walk south from the villas. If you don't mind children and you like a giant pool with a swim-up bar and an adjacent pizzeria, you'll be happy here. The hotel's decor is a slightly lower-end echo of Tortuga Bay, and there isn't the same sense of privacy. But the deluxe rooms feature mahogany furniture and ocean views, and it's good for families. In high season rooms run from \$120 for a single to \$450 for a three-bedroom beach casita. The tennis center has six clay courts, a talented pro named Felix de los Santos (who fixed my forehand in two lessons) and ever-present ball boys available for a friendly match should you need a partner. The hotel also organizes scuba and snorkeling trips, horseback riding and other excursions.

Another option is to rent a private home in Corales. Not all of the 126 houses are available, but Baryshnikov's eight-bedroom oceanfront villa is—for roughly \$28,000 a week. The dancer spends about one month out of the year here golfing, fishing and taking pictures in local dive bars and strip clubs (they were exhibited in a few venues in 2007 under the name "Dominican Moves"). The house is built around a courtyard that opens onto the pool and looks out to the Caribbean. The furnishings are European and masculine: claw-foot bathtubs and a dance studio and workout room. Perks for renters in Corales include use of the private jetport and private beaches, a house staff and first dibs on tee times at the new Fazio course.

The success of this elite enclave is due not only to the leadership of Frank Rainieri but also in no small part to Oscar de la Renta, whose arrival in the late 1990s gave Puntacana a certain glamorous effervescence. Born in Santo Domingo, de la Renta left the DR as a young man to study painting in Spain and didn't return until the '70s, when he bought a house at Casa de Campo. That suited him for the next 25 years, but when the resort's owners, the Fanjul family, built up the airport in the mid-'90s to accommodate direct jet flights from the United States, de la Renta and his wife, Annette, decided to move on.

"Annette started to say that our house felt like the VIP lounge of the airport," says de la Renta, who had never met Rainieri but cold-called him to explain that he and his friend, the singer Julio Iglesias, wanted to

buy some oceanfront property. Rainieri didn't have the capital to develop Corales at the time and wasn't sure he wanted to sell. Eventually the Rainieris and the de la Rentas went to dinner at La Yola, an open-air restaurant overlooking Puntacana's marina. When de la Renta got up to sing with a local trio of musicians, and Rainieri's wife, Haydee, jumped into the act, a friendship began. De la Renta and Iglesias offered to buy out the remaining original investors, and they joined Rainieri and Kheel as the main partners in Puntacana.

These days the reins at the resort are slowly being handed over to the younger generation, including Eliza and Alex Bolen (Oscar de la Renta's stepdaughter and her husband), Ted Kheel's nephew, Jake, and especially Rainieri's three children. All the younger Rainieris play integral roles in the business: Paola handles public relations, Francesca is director of administration and Frank Elias heads up real estate development. In addition to having lunch with their father every Friday, the children are expected for Sunday lunch at the family compound in Corales. "Our dad really thinks he's Don Corleone, and he is not happy if you're not there," says Francesca.

The familial vibe carries through to the rest of Puntacana. Once you spend time here, you notice that there are more employees than are probably needed. On the beach you'll see one gardener raking the seaweed, another picking it up. The resort's golf pro, Jay Overton, explains the Rainieri mindset: "I went to Don Frank and said I needed eight edging machines to work on the bunkers, and he told me that for every machine I bought, it would take away several Dominican jobs. So he suggested I forget about the machines and teach a couple of guys how to build and maintain the course by hand. It probably costs about 20 percent more to edge the greens that way, but this family is more concerned with long-term growth than quarterly profits."

When asked about this desire to balance people and profits at Puntacana, Rainieri explains that he doesn't see himself as a developer. "A developer builds something and moves on," he says. "We've built something here. What I'm trying to do is integrate other families—workers as well as guests—into our family."

For details on the Puntacana Hotel and Tortuga Bay as well as renting or building private homes at the resort, visit puntacana.com. For information on the top nearby resorts, see ["Departures' Guide to Cap Cana."](#)