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the Dominican Republic.



# The Dominican Republic's New Digs

*Words*  
Nate Storey

The arrival of new upscale hotels to the Dominican Republic's north coast is revamping its image as an all-inclusive bacchanalia.





“First time down?” Martin Kuczmarski, COO of Soho House, asks me. We’re in a golf cart being chauffeured back to our casitas from the spa at Amanera, the second Caribbean offering from Singapore-based Aman Resorts. “My wife and I love it here.”

As we twist through the resort’s sloping seaside golf course, originally designed by Robert Trent Jones, Sr. and refurbished by his son Rees, a prodigious concrete-and-glass structure emerges into view. We’re approaching Casa Grande, the open-air lobby, restaurant, and library, and the beating heart of the property. Indonesian teak accents blend with a network of reflecting streams tracing the outer edges of the third level, a clever substitution for hand railings that allows the building’s linear lines to frame views of the crescent coastline unobstructed. It’s an architectural marvel for a region not exactly known for man-made testaments to ingenuity; the only thing comparable is the brutalist ivory-white El Blok on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. Just off to the right, a cluster of 25 wood-hewn casitas, with biodiverse roof gardens and private plunge pools, dot a low-lying amphitheater that spills onto the Playa Grande Beach—the area is a premier stop on the kiteboarding circuit—which appears to be inhabited by no more than six people. The scene is an unlikely one: architect John Heah’s austere take on tropical luxury leering over the edge of a 60-foot promontory, presiding over an empty expanse of flaxen sand, with fashionable guests flitting about the grounds in a locale typically associated with spring break.

There’s a cell of travel junkies who plan their trips around Aman openings, knowing the brand often blazes a trail to the next great place. Head to any hotel in the portfolio and guests like Kuczmarski are likely to be there. Celebrities, fashion designers, film producers, titans of finance—all card-carrying members in the fan

club. If you’re looking for a bellwether that the north coast is the Caribbean’s new luxury outpost, Amanera is a good place to start. It exists outside the patina of all-inclusives that have been the hallmark of the Dominican Republic for decades, and it’s not the only sign a rebranding effort is underway.

Columbus is often credited as one of the first admirers of the island’s riotous mix of jungle and azure sea—he famously anointed it the most beautiful land mass in the world. But its rise as a holiday hotspot can be attributed to the battalion of travel agents who helped cultivate a generation of vacation-package visitors. The aftermath is on display toward the easternmost tip, where Punta Cana has steadily held the mantle as the capital of tourist revelry, with the type of self-contained resorts that mark guests with wristbands. But a shift is in motion, says Amanera general manager Rocco Bova, both philosophically and geographically. “The Playa Grande development is an integral part of a change from a long-time all-inclusive destination to one for discerning travelers,” he says. “The north coast is diverse, with untouched beaches and tropical rainforest; more upscale hotel and villa projects are planned.” >



IRENE MIKELIS, (PREVIOUS SPREAD) SIMON LEWIS/COURTESY AMANERA

ROMAN BOED





At the opposite end of a long, sandy stretch from Amanera, near mangrove forests and sea caves, a New York financier and his wife, Celerie Kemble, an interior designer, assembled a group of prominent investors like architect Richard Meier and news anchor Charlie Rose to fashion a different kind of experience at the new Playa Grande Beach Club. (The couple owned the real estate where Amanera now stands, but sold it to a developer in 2007.) To ensure the local flavor remains integrated, they built small cottages for the beach vendors that hawk jewelry and grilled fish, encouraging guests to wander over for fresh, authentic meals. The results of an annual mask-making contest sponsored by the hotel can be found inside the nine tragaluz (patterned woodwork) cottages, inspired by Dominican colonial architecture, where intricate sea creature faces hang on the walls. “What I love is that we don’t know who made them until the prizes are given out,” Kemble says. “One time it was a 14-year-old girl that came out of the crowd, other times it’s 20-year-old boys.”

PATRICK CLINE

Kemble washed the breezy, candy-colored interiors in evocative details: custom wicker furniture, louvered-shutter doors, and freestanding copper tubs. Each one displays an eclecticism infused with a Dominican-meets-Palm Beach flavor, from trellis beds with copper vines crawling up the posters to over 30 different patterns on ceramic-tiled floors. The manicured lawn leads past sea grape and almond trees to the two-story main house, looking out at the lap pool lined with shaded cabanas. It’s comprised of an open-air restaurant that serves seafood dishes sourced from the fisherman anchoring their skiffs off the beachfront and a rum and cigar library on the second floor that functions as a communal living room. One could easily confuse the setting for the buttoned-up British island of Bermuda. Next spring, the couple plans to open treehouse suites on the property’s 2,000-acre tract of virgin rainforest. The vibe feels like you’re staying in the guest house of a stylish friend’s summer home. “We want people to behave like they belong here, not like they’re obeying guest services rules,” she says. “It’s free-flowing and open to the outdoors, and extraordinarily pretty.” >



PATRICK CLINE





The interest in the area from major hotel brands extends beyond this idyllic cut of shoreline just outside of Rio San Juan. The gateway to Playa Grande is Puerto Plata, a province an hour and a half drive west, where visitors catch a humble coastal road that passes through tiny beach towns. One of the first is Playa Imbert, where the Gansevoort Hotel Group planted its flag in 2015. Fronting a mocha-hued beach that sweeps for miles into the foreground of the cable cars scooting up to Mount Isabel de Torres, it's the celebrity-favorite brand's second Caribbean outpost, after Turks and Caicos. The aesthetic has a South Beach sheen, with 48 sleek suites overlooking the ocean and a cascading pool flanked by oversized daybeds. This fall, a L'Occitane spa will be unveiled, the first stage of a multifaceted plan to create a small village with high-end shops, a salon, and a rooftop lounge. Also in the works: an outpost of The Curtain, a private members club concept debuting next year in London, to be set in the surf hamlet of Cabarete, on the route to Playa Grande.

Further east, in the Bay of Samana, an Isay Weinfeld-designed Four Seasons Resort has broken ground, part of an ambitious, sustainably-minded development called Tropicalia. The mixed-use venture has drawn interest from pop culture stars such as Brad Pitt and Jay Z. For Kemble, the draw is simple: "The Dominican Republic isn't just a tiny sesame seed island, it's a large country with industry and culture, and its own sense of identity," she says, pointing out that many Caribbean islands lack a real culture and have become homogenized because they revolve around tourism. "Here's your islandy music and your islandy cocktail on an island," she says. "We're nestled between two small towns and it feels like you actually visited the country, not just land at an airport and get whisked off."

Back at Amanera, I'm tucking into cassava root bread and red snapper wrapped in banana leaf in a venue quite plainly named The Restaurant. The mood is subdued, with tables of diners sipping rum from the nearby Ron Barceló distillery and puffing cigars hand-rolled by a master blender at La Aurora's century-old factory. There isn't a swim-up bar or discotheque in sight, just the candlelight flickering in the wind and a local musician playing bachata on her guitar.





SIMON LEWIS / COURTESY AMANERA

EAT: El Babunuco

In addition to making Amanera a custom blend of cigars and leading on-site rolling classes for guests, Juan Alberto Martinez runs a beloved thatched-roof seafood spot in the nearby mountains.  
*Calle J No. 4 Camino Del Saltadero, Cabrera*

SLEEP: Amanera

The ultimate indulgence: an all-casita property with a dramatic seaside golf course, beach club, and spa showcasing traditional Dominican treatments. Book an excursion to one of the inland lagoons on horseback.  
*Auto. 5 Carretera Rio San Juan, Cabrera; aman.com*

HANGOUT

Cabarete, a seaside town about 30 minutes away, has an energetic beach scene and lively nightlife, with surfer expats and locals filling the restaurants and bars that line the main strip.



# Bermuda Sails

The sunny British protectorate prepares its pink sands for the sailing event of the year: America's Cup.

*Words*  
Mark Ellwood





LEV SAVITSKY/COURTESY LEDGELETS. (PREVIOUS SPREAD) STEPHEN BONK/COURTESY LEDGELETS

## Visitors lolled in hammocks strung over the waters of its calm, private bay

It was one of the most lavish bashes in Bermuda's history. The dazzling, three-day party in July drew VIPs from across the world to this tiny archipelago to mark the reopening of a beloved local landmark: the 400-room Hamilton Princess and Beach Club, reborn after a two-year, \$100 million overhaul. The highlight was the Grand Opening, a black-tie celebration that ribboned through the grounds, where guests mingled amid sculptures by Yayoi Kusama and KAWS, or dawdled on the hotel's marina. The women dressed mostly in floaty, floor-length gowns, while the men paired tuxedo jackets with the island's namesake shorts and knee-length socks, a nod to the summer heat; a bold pair even opted for printed board shorts—in case, perhaps, they felt the urge to take a dip in the pool.

That night, chef Marcus Samuelsson spent the evening christening the kitchens of his new on-site bistro, before continuing cooking the next day. Samuelsson's second gig was an al fresco supper at the hotel's new beach club at Sinky Bay on South Shore, where visitors lolled in hammocks strung over the waters of its calm, private bay. Such a splashy hotel launch might seem jarring in a country long renowned as subdued and discreet, but it's only the first salvo in the rebirth of Bermuda. This transformation is anchored by a storied event scheduled for next summer. In 2017, for the first time, this tiny nation will host the America's Cup, the century-old catamaran race that is the world's most prestigious and glamorous yachting regatta.

It's a startling departure for the British protectorate, a fish hook-shaped cluster of eight atolls barely a mile wide at its largest point. Best known for the reinsurance business, Bermuda is a hushed, monied place where per capita income is among the highest anywhere in the world, and the pastel-colored houses here cost on average more than a \$1 million each. Though the weather is balmy (Bermuda sits in the Atlantic, not to the Caribbean), locals still maintain a sense of crisp politeness that's clearly a holdover from Britain. "You always address a Bermudian by saying 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon,'" says expat American Miranda Conway, who runs a series of tony fashion boutiques dotted around the island. "Bermudians are used to people coming from all over because this is a tiny little island full of people from everywhere, but they really appreciate when tourists make that effort." It likely helps maintain roadside decorum that visitors cannot rent cars—instead, they must settle for scooters or bicycles. >



The coastline here is rimmed with beaches that feature its distinctive pinkish sand, which is caused not by coral, as is often claimed, but the pulverized remains of a microscopic ocean floor organism. The pick of the shores, undoubtedly, is Elbow Beach, a mile-long, Malibu-like stretch where moguls such as Michael Bloomberg maintain enormous vacation homes. The offshore waters are clear and inviting enough for sculling in small boats, or for scuba-diving in the reefs on which so many ships have run aground since the expansionist British claimed the islands as their first ever overseas territory in 1609.

In fact, Bermuda largely owes its main settlements, Hamilton and the Town of St. George—call it St. George’s, like the locals—to shipwrecked mariners who caught the wrong winds on their return from the New World. They made the most of being marooned here and founded the latter town on the island’s northern reaches. It’s now a UNESCO-cited World Heritage spot: Note the cedar-beamed roof of the four century-old St. Peter’s church, which was clearly constructed by shipwrights rather than builders. On the western coast sits Hamilton, which took over from St. George’s as the capital more than 200 years ago; it remains the business hub and site of most modern amenities. It’s a handy base for the America’s Cup, sitting as it does on the edge of Bermuda’s huge natural harbor, the Great Sound, where the races are scheduled to unspool.



TOM PURVES

The impact of those impending catamarans is palpable across the island, far beyond the bounds of the Hamilton Princess, the race’s official host hotel. Several other new properties are set to open here, too: the 36-room, five-star Loren on Pink Beach, for example, or Ledgelets, a high-end cluster of homey cottages radically updated by new owners, John and Alice Young. Major dock expansion is under way in readiness for the flotilla of superyachts that will be sailing in the racers’ wake, while buzzy local restaurateurs like Jason Berwick won’t simply let Samuelsson steal the spotlight. His Devil’s Isle coffee roastery is expanding with a new farm-to-table spot, the Village Pantry, while longtime local favorite Blu has expanded its already-huge verandah specifically to provide a better viewing perch for those boat races next summer.

Even Bermuda’s shorts are undergoing a makeover, thanks to young entrepreneurs like Adam Petty & Sam Outerbridge of Coral Coast Clothing. This firm’s shorts are tailor-made for a fresh generation of preppies. The silhouettes are slimmer, and the colors—reds, greens, and seafoam blue—are brightening up (the duo also donates a percentage of profits to a local reef-boosting charity). “Bermuda shorts are key to the way of life here. We’re very particular about them,” Outerbridge says. “They’re held in an echelon above any other garment. It’s just our thing.” And of course, they’re planning a special collection to honor the race—the ultimate bermudas for Bermuda.





COURTESY HAMILTON PRINCESS + BEACH CLUB

### EAT: Devil's Isle

A warm and carefree atmosphere makes this a great daytime spot to meet for coffee. By night, this is the place to order fresh line-caught rockfish and elbow-deep bowls of spicy bouillabaisse.

*19 Burnaby Street, Hamilton.*

### SLEEP: Hamilton Princess

The 400-room Hamilton Princess hotel is reborn after a two-year, \$100 million overhaul. As the official host hotel of America's Cup, it is Bermuda's new hot spot.

*76 Pitts Bay Road*

### HANGOUT: Elbow Beach

The pick of the shores, undoubtedly, is Elbow Beach, a mile-long, Malibu-like stretch in the middle of the island where the posh come out to play.



# Panama's Pure Paradise

*Words and Photography*  
Robert Michael Poole

The Kuna Indians preserve  
an untainted culture on San  
Blas, a string of hundreds  
of Caribbean islands.





A Kuna Indian woman wearing a traditional patterned *mola* dress.



San Blas is a chain of 378 mostly uninhabited specks of land, spread out from the Gulf of Guna Yala like a streak of skipping stones breaking the surface. There, tens of thousands of Kuna people have resisted modernization, only swapping traditional body paint for clothes that mimic the same elaborate patterns once daubed on their ancestors' skin. The Kuna gained autonomy from Panama back in 1925—they are the descendants of those who fled to the islands during the times of Spanish colonial incursion on the mainland centuries earlier—and have preserved many of the traditions that have allowed them to thrive on their island home.

From under the lush green leaf roof of a hut, propped up by the branches and trunks of palm trees, an elderly woman emerges in mola dress, bringing with her a much-welcome refreshment: a coconut. For a member of the Kuna Indian tribe, the *ogob* (coconut) is a vital export, and out here on the islands of San Blas, there is little else to trade—the riches here are the real, pure simplicities we've come to define as the modern ideal of paradise.

There is no tourism infrastructure out here, only traditions, one of which is that women have authority and are considered the heads of their families. The groom takes the bride's name, not the other way around. I receive my coconut from the head of one of only two families on an island in the distant Cayos Holandésas archipelago. Enraptured by her regalia of arm and leg beads, patterned blouse and wrapped skirt, butterfly necklace, and golden nose ring, her smile seems like the sun shining back at me, through the sounds of her native Tulekaya.

The simplicity of San Blas lies in its material scarcity, a strong reminder of how completely dependent the rest of us are on modern convenience. Here, where white sands are decorated with starfish, dolphins play in turquoise waters, and palm trees sway over tiny islands, the picture postcards of paradise are made real.

Local houses and facilities across San Blas are constructed using local natural resources.



Yet without a sense of adventure and a willingness to mostly forego hot water, electricity, and laminated restaurant menus in favor of, well, whatever the locals were able to catch that day, San Blas could prove a challenging test.

To venture into the territory, which covers 100 square miles of open water, adventurers seeking the ultimate authentic eco-tourist getaway must first reach Carti Port, which is a two and a half hour drive from Panama City. It's here that the Kuna meet the mainland on the north coast of Panama, and increasingly make a living from tourism. Prices for entry to the region vary, as does the skiff boat ride, depending on how far from the mainland guests wish to escape into nature. With no credit card usage or stores, bringing cash, sunscreen, water, and snacks is essential.

The first islands encountered are laden with cramped shanty towns that spill out over the water. Much of the Kuna population live here, closer to the coast, but as you head further from shore, crystal clear waters soon surround the boat, and what looks like specks on the horizon reveal themselves to be dozens of scattered islets. Luxury catamarans and yachts mingle with wooden boats in the vast sprawl, each island appearing more pristine than the next, with simple huts sitting quietly amongst the tall palms, between which clotheslines make for casual decor.

Wyle Island, around a 40 minutes' ride from Carti Port, is as developed as San Blas gets. Its series of six lodgings built above the water are like a rustic version of a Maldives resort, providing rare private bathrooms and real beds. Solar panels provide electricity, and no wonder: With precious little shade in the region, all visitors need to be prepared with sun protection. The restaurant here, Wailydup, is a stop off for many boats, serving lobsters and fish as fresh they come, to the soundtrack of lapping waves.

Modern Panama has become associated with hidden wealth, thanks to the Panama Papers, but in the Kuna islands of San Blas, luxury is simplicity, where swimming, snorkeling, and beach walks are the most arduous activities on offer.

Many believe that the Kuna word “bannaba” is the origin of the name “Panama.” It translates simply as “distant,” and nothing else could be more synonymous with San Blas, the kind of paradise most of us thought no longer existed.

The Kuna word “bannaba” is the origin of the name “Panama.” It translates simply as “distant.”



Boats float near the coast of the Cayos Holandéses Islands in Panama.





One of the San Blas islands.

EAT

Food here is as fresh as it gets, so much so that you won't really know what's on offer until moments before. Expect to sample ocean fish like red snapper, or lobster, which are readily available on Wyle Island, where an underwater pen is kept. Plantains and coconuts are common side dishes.

SLEEP

The majority of travelers go the full eco, camping or staying in rustic huts, but these aren't the only options. Besides the overwater villas on Wyle Island, consider Yandup Island Lodge, with its 10 cabins boasting balconies with hammocks, meals, guided tours, and the occasional yoga retreat.  
*yandupisland.com*

HANGOUT

As you might expect, San Blas's top hangout is in the ocean. About 40 minutes from the coastline and a short ride from the most popular islands, a shimmering white sand bank lies waist height below the surface, offering a perfect spot for snorkeling with its abundant population of large orange starfish. Ask your boat driver to stop off at the "sand bank," and they'll know what you mean.