

LUXURY LIVING INTERNATIONAL



Puntacana State of Mind

After 40 years, this Dominican Republic icon keeps getting better and better.

by Mark Robertson

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I have visited literally dozens of luxury resort communities in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past 15 years. I've seen a range of possibilities for the affluent traveler, discovering while many developments are quite lovely, some are not all they aspire to be. Then there are the rare, truly exceptional luxury communities in paradise. Those that offer not only breathtaking scenery, luxe accommodations, ample amenities, exciting diversions and the ultimate in privacy, but provide a real sense of community and a distinct lifestyle amid the beauty. The ones that if you have the means, you'll surely become an owner in order to experience this sublime place again and again.

Puntacana Resort and Club is one of these special places. For about 100 fortunate people from around the world who proudly call Puntacana home (or home-away-from-home), it's a place they can't wait to get back to each time they must depart for the real world. Celebrating its 40th anniversary, Puntacana is about more than the amazing Caribbean Sea views, miles of pristine beaches and oceanfront golf that the community is renowned for. It's about more than the fine dining, world-class spa, full-service marina, exclusive hotels and multi-million dollar homes. Puntacana is a way of life, a place that provides its owners and guests, whether they visit once a year or stay for months at a time, with a real sense of community in paradise. Events throughout the year, from Owner's Weekend to the Oscar de la Renta Tennis Social to the 10k Road Race, help build this sense of community.

I was staying at the private Oscar de la Renta-designed Tortuga Bay villas, and from the moment the Tortuga Bay's VIP service met me at the airport and whisked me through a separate Customs line to a private car awaiting my arrival, I knew this place was special. I quickly noticed Puntacana has a way of making you feel at home whether you are staying for a few days or for the entire season.

Forty years ago, Puntacana was little more than 58 million square-meters of uninhabited jungle on the easternmost tip of the D.R. The story of the inception and evolution of the now 2,500-acre luxury master-planned community is one of determination and commitment. Two men can be credited with Puntacana's existence. Ted Kheel was part of a group of American investors (most of whom had never stepped foot on the island) who chipped in to buy the land, and D.R.-local Frank Rainieri was the shining light who helped guide Kheel on exactly what to do with the mass they had acquired. Facing many challenges over the years—from raising capital to appeasing shareholders to dealing with the local government—Rainieri and Kheel brought Puntacana from quaint hotel to a mature resort community that puts a premium on the private, personalized club experience.



Before the development reached its peak, they first built an airport, which in 1984 brought in 2,460 visitors. It's fitting that the pretty, thatched-roof airport is designed and owned by a resort and not a government. Today, the privately owned, commercially operated Punta Cana International Airport welcomes more than three million passengers a year and is the leading point of entry in the D.R. A two-hour flight from Miami makes the Punta Cana area an easy get-away.

It was the arrival of two new partners and residents in 1997, world-renowned Dominican fashion designer Oscar de la Renta and his friend musician Julio Iglesias, that really put Puntacana on the map. Many celebrities and high-profile individuals are attracted to Puntacana for its blend of wide-open spaces and privacy. "Low density is one of our key ingredients," says Rainieri, who saw to it that Puntacana was designed so houses are spread apart, green spaces are numerous and nature, while contained, reigns supreme.



For 28 years, de la Renta had owned a home in Casa de Campo, another of the island's resort communities. "It was just too congested and I decided to move on," he says. "I had never been to the Punta Cana area, but I flew over in a helicopter, and there was a natural beauty to the place. And the proximity to the airport was also very important." The fashion designer owns the largest piece of land in the development, and his

neighbor Iglesias is said to own the largest home in Puntacana.

"I believe in sustainable development, sustainable tourism and sustainability," Rainieri says. "When no one was talking about sustainability back in the late '80s, we were involved in it here." From the very beginning, Kheel and Rainieri have sought to support the local Dominican economy and protect the environment. Puntacana has set aside 1,500 acres of land for a nature preserve and established the Puntacana Ecological Foundation, and Oscar de la Renta has designed furniture made from sustainable local woods and fabrics that can be manufactured in the D.R.

As nature goes, this place has it all. The clearest and most stunning blue-green waters, miles of white sand beaches, 15 natural springs, and a bird population so diverse that a book *Discovering the Remarkable Birds of Punta Cana* has been published.

But a mainstay in the fabric of this great resort community is golf. Its first course, La Cana, a PB Dye signature, offers up challenging but fair oceanfront Caribbean golf with six holes on the sea. La Cana not only features great looking golf with spectacular vistas, but is also sparsely lined with about 100 beautiful luxury homes, some of which are so unique and spectacular they actually add to view. Homes around La Cana average well over 5,000 square feet and range from \$1.7 million to more than \$5 million. "We are a beach and golf destination and much more," Rainieri says. "Normally, when [travelers] go to the Caribbean, they go to a beach destination or a golf destination, but our mix is unique. They can have a house 400 yards from the beach with a golf course in front, and that's not an easy thing."

Villa and private home rentals are a fantastic option for those wanting to experience Puntacana firsthand. The community also hosts two hotels, the recently renovated Puntacana Hotel and the private de la Renta-designed Tortuga Bay. Oscar de la Renta has infused his Dominican heritage into the design of each villa, creating an artful harmony between simplicity and elegance. "I wanted to add to the peace of the surroundings," he says.



Puntacana will add another signature course to its golf line-up and real estate offerings with Hacienda, which meanders through the thick green vegetation just a few hundred meters from La Cana. But the crown jewel of this amazing golf community at Puntacana will without a doubt be what many are already calling one of the finest and most spectacular 18 holes on the planet, the soon-to-be-famous Corales. With more than 235 acres of grass (average courses may have 80 acres) that resembles a fine, velvet carpet set over an undulating landscape set right on edge cliffs that are kissed by the amazingly blue Caribbean Sea, Corales has the look of a Scottish course set in paradise.

Rumored to be acclaimed golf course designer Tom Fazio's last design, he was given as much land as he wanted and an open checkbook (a rarity today) to produce a golf experience that would be unrivaled in the Americas. He didn't disappoint. With huge rolling fairways and a gorgeous natural backdrop enjoyed by few places in the world, Fazio may have just sealed his legacy as one of the best maestros of dirt, grass and sand.

With current residents of the exclusive Corales community set within Puntacana including Oscar de la Renta, Julio Englais, Oscar de la Hoya and many political giants (from former presidents to current heads of state), Corales is quickly becoming a place for the rich and famous to escape their busy lives. The private beach club for Corales owners on a protected lagoon may be one of the sexiest beaches I've seen. With home sites in this ultra exclusive *starting at* \$1.8 million, those who have worked hard for their success can enjoy one of the most spectacular golf course communities in the Caribbean and quite possibly the world.