

Happy Trails

By Nina Hemphill Reeder

EXPLORE THE FINER SIDE OF LIFE IN SCENIC PUNTA CANA

As I climb down to the tarmac in the open-air terminal where the damp salty air greets my arrival, I imagine Christopher Columbus feeling the same exhilaration when he first touched down on the isle of Hispaniola—though for different reasons. He was making the historic settlement of what is now known as the Dominican Republic, nestled next to its

belabored neighbor Haiti, and I was welcoming the euphoria of the Caribbean breeze.

I'm thankful for my carry-on luggage and VIP airport guide (complimentary with a stay at Tortuga Bay) because I am quickly whisked through the Punta Cana airport, then transported to Tortuga Bay at the Puntacana Resort and Club (puntacana.com) on the eastern coast of the

island. The Tortuga Bay villas, just one among the many accommodations offered for guests of the resort, were designed by Dominican-born fashion designer Oscar de la Renta, who is also an investor in the resort. Needless to say, the villas are gorgeous. I enter via an enormous living room, where three sets of French doors lead to my private patio and ocean view. ▶▶



Puntacana Eco Reserve Lagoon



Segway tour by the beach

...explore the 1,500 acres of trails that lead you to the 15 natural spring water swimming lagoons along the way.



Local artist

The décor of cool greens, beiges and yellows radiates as the vast amounts of sunlight storm in through every crevice of the Bermuda shutters.

I'm eager to unpack and secure a beach chair, some coconut drink concoction and guacamole with fried plantain chips. However, when I discover that I have been given my very own golf cart for transportation around the resort, my plans are immediately diverted for the sake of a little exploration.

I set out to lose myself within the 26-mile property only to find that I'm actually lost when the designated golf cart lane ends and turns into a lonely road surrounded by wild brush and the occasional angry

speeding car. Because I missed the route within the resort, I re-enter through the marina area, where some of the ritzy vacation homes and private residences of the resort are located. After 20 minutes of trying to communicate in my best Spanish my misdirection to the gate guard, I'm allowed to cruise down the palm tree-lined pavement toward the more familiar manicured landscape and hub of the resort. But I'm immediately derailed again when I discover the ecological reserve and park. While tours are offered, I go alone—and on foot—to explore the 1,500 acres of trails that lead you to the 15 natural spring water swimming lagoons along the way.

Hunger calls midway through the hike, so I'm back on my original mission to find food. There are eight restaurants to choose from. In time, I go to five of them, eating langostino tails over risotto at La Yola, a Mediterranean-style restaurant; flaky fish cooked in coconut milk at La Playa Blanca, an upscale beachside bar and restaurant; and the ubiquitous ceviche at all of them.

A few days in, thoroughly distracted by the resort's pulls such as its Segway tours and Six Senses Spa, I am reminded of the main reason I'm here: to witness the grand opening of the Corales golf course, which welcomes a prestigious crowd of local notables, the



Six Senses Spa Sunporch



Tortuga Bay Bedroom

D.R. DO'S

Follow these tips for an easy, breezy Dominican vacation.

Sunny Side

The Dominican Republic is warm all year round, so the water is great for winter travelers. However, that's also high season, which typically coincides with high prices. Go in the hotter summer season to save a few bucks.



Money Talks



Visitors traveling without a visa are asked to pay for a \$10 tourist card, which is not factored into your airfare, so (if you're not issued a card beforehand) be certain to have the exact amount in U.S. dollars on hand upon arrival.

The Dish

With their Latin American, African and Taino Indian heritage, try traditional Dominican multicultural fare. The national dish is called La Bandera (The Flag)—red beans and rice served with different meats.



Puntacana Resort and Club CEO and cofounder Frank Rainieri, Oscar de la Renta and even the president of the Dominican Republic, Leonel Fernandez. Designed by one of the biggest names in course architecture, Tom Fazio, who also made an appearance, the 18-hole course mesmerizes with alluring views of ocean cliffs and stunning landscapes. I don't golf, but I pick up a club just for an excuse to walk the plush grassy grounds a little longer. I conclude my trip with a walk on the resort's three-mile beach stretch of white sand and

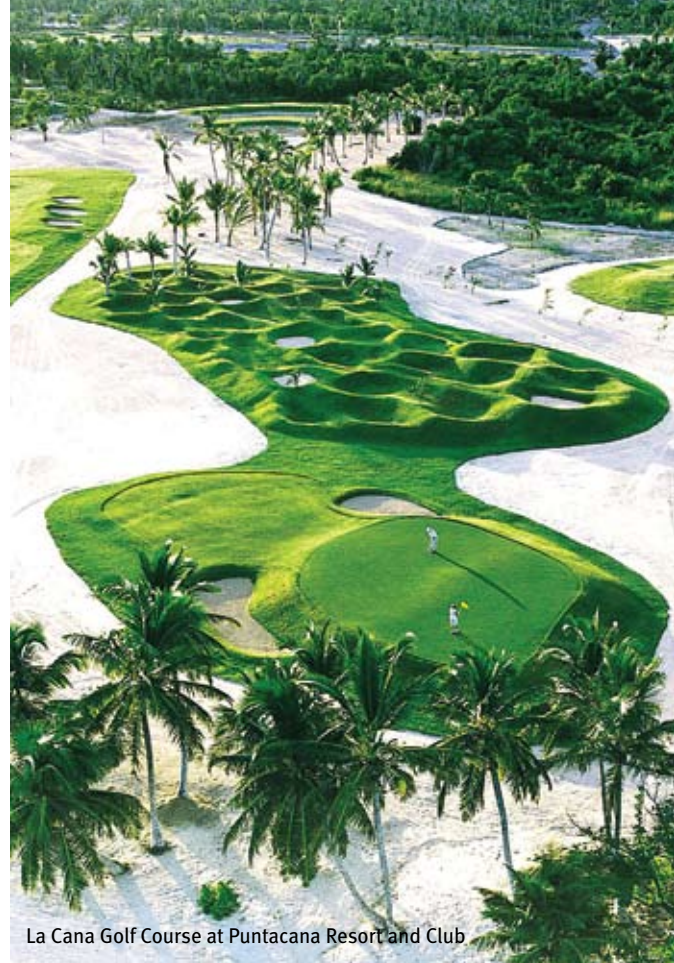
brilliant blue ocean. It's here that I realize that through all my adventures I never did work out my beachside drink and chips scenario. But I, like Columbus, will have to leave knowing I will return to discover more.



Corales Inauguration



Marina



La Cana Golf Course at Puntacana Resort and Club