

USA TODAY LIFE™

**Musical
dreams do
come true**

Ariana
Groover is
a student
of Broadway
10D

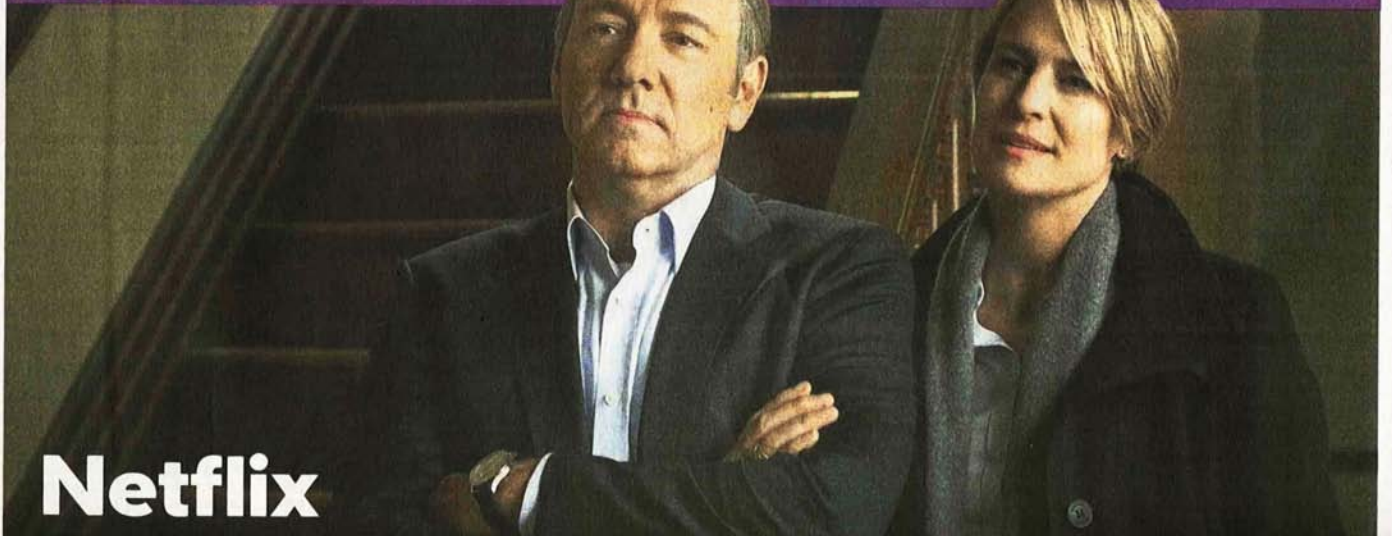
TODD RITT
USA TODAY



**GETAWAYS FOR
.01 PERCENTERS**

Puerto Rican paradise **6-7D**

COVER STORY



Netflix



PRISAGROUP®

6D LIFE

TRAVEL



The Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve opened in December on Puerto Rico's north coast, is an ultra-luxe resort on the site of Laurance Rockefeller's iconic Dorado Beach Hotel.

Coming up

Feb. 22

Deluxe spa,
Tucson

March 15

Upscale cruise,
Burma

March 29

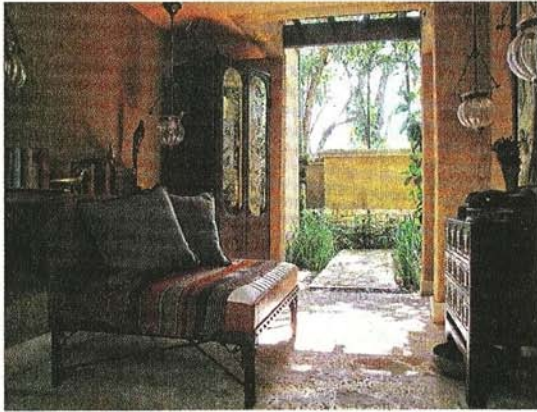
Custom culinary
tour, Hong Kong



PRISAGROUP®

In Puerto Rico, paradise may be worth the price

More deluxe digs are in the works as the island aims to attract the high-end traveler



The resort's Spa Botánico occupies 5 acres and has a relaxed, Asian vibe, with custom-made furniture from Thailand.

Jayne Clark
USA TODAY

ADORADO, PUERTO RICO A few miles past the last strip mall in this north coast town, a discreet sign beckons the privileged .01 percent down a lush ginger- and palm-frosted lane. It ends at a rushing wall of water flanked by a lily pond, a sleek, open-air pavilion, and a personal valet who greets new arrivals with a cold drink and whisks them via golf cart to spacious seaside digs.

If this isn't perfection, it's close. And it should be, considering that high-season rates at the new Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve start at \$1,499 a night. The resort, which opened in December, is the second in the chain's new ultra-luxury Reserve brand. (The first is in Thailand; more are in the works in Mexico, Morocco and beyond.)

With its 114 oceanfront rooms (some with rooftop plunge pools), three golf courses, 5-acre spa (including two treehouse treatment rooms) and celebrity-chef restaurant (Mi Casa by José Andrés), the resort brings a new level of luxury to an island that in recent decades lost some of its luster.

But it's not the only high-end newcomer. Waldorf-Astoria, W and St.

Regis have arrived. In the works: J.W. Marriott and Four Seasons. And in San Juan, the Condado Vanderbilt, the island's first luxury lodging when it opened in 1919, is getting a \$220 million revamp after being shuttered for 16 years.

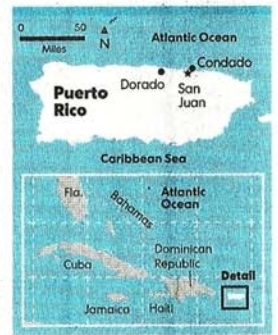
Tourism officials — and investors — are banking on Puerto Rico's easy access (a three-hour, non-stop flight from New York), plus its diverse amusements (adventure, history, cuisine, golf, arts, entertainment) to attract a high-end clientele looking to do more than sit on the beach. And with the spate of new luxury digs, they say they're now in a position to do so.

"Before, they'd land in Puerto Rico and keep on going," says José Suarez, a former tourism director and president of the hotel company that owns the Condado Vanderbilt. "We've always had to overcome the *West Side Story* syndrome. But for many years we had the who's who of upper-echelon travelers. Then, for some reason, we let that business go to other islands."

Tax credits and other incentives are helping to drive the luxury boom, notes Clarisa Jimenez, president of the Puerto Rico Hotel and Tourism Association. "The target was always



The Knickerbocker is made with rum, Cointreau, lemon and lime juice and raspberry syrup.



Source ESRI
USA TODAY

► STORY CONTINUES ON 7D

Amelia Earhart was among notable guests

► CONTINUED FROM 6D

more affluent travelers, but the problem was in getting the five-and six-star properties. It took us a little (time) but now everything is falling into place."

A RICH HISTORY

The Dorado Beach area, about 40 minutes west of San Juan, in some ways reflects the island's seesawing fortunes. It originally was the home of Clara Livingston, intrepid daughter of a New York physician who moved here in the 1920s to operate a 1,700-acre coconut and pineapple plantation. She sold the land to tycoon conservationist Laurance Rockefeller in 1955. Three years later, he opened the Dorado Beach Hotel.

"All the rich and famous came here," says Mark Lipschutz, head of Caribbean Property Group, one of three partner companies involved in the Ritz-Carlton Reserve development. "But the product started to go (downhill)."

Rockefeller built two golf courses, including the renowned East Course, newly restored by Robert Trent Jones Jr. whose father designed the original more than 50 years ago. Rockefeller also created 11 miles of trails, which still wind through the property. Also intact are three miles of palm-fringed, silky white oceanfront.

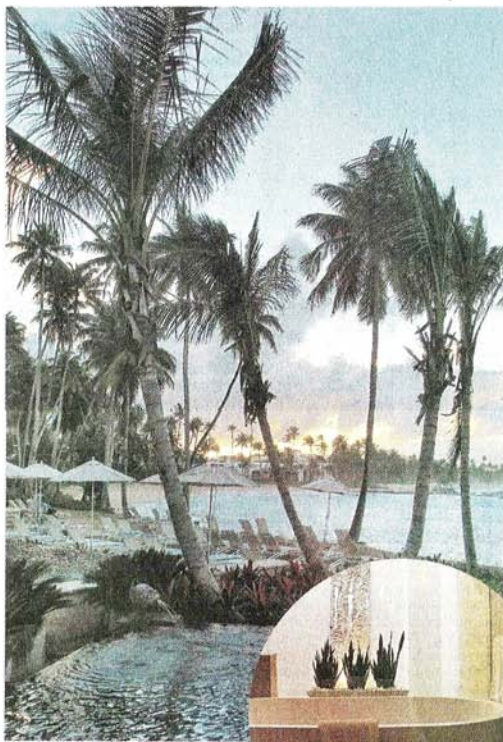
The hotel later became a Hyatt and closed for good in 2005. The new Ritz-Carlton occupies 50 of the 1,400-acre parcel. About 100 Ritz-Carlton residential units, starting at \$2.3 million, also are planned for the site.

Clara Livingston's four-bedroom villa has been restored to its plantation-chic glory days and rents for \$25,000 a night. (Historical note: Amelia Earhart, a friend of Livingston's, stayed here shortly before her final, fateful flight.)

The hotel's \$1,499 to \$4,698 room rates do not include breakfast (\$28 for the cold buffet), a spot on one of the infinity-poolside cabana beds (\$250 for a half a day) or the daily mandatory resort fee (\$95, plus tax).

They do include Wi-Fi and in-room French-press coffee, a pair of flip-flops and use of bicycles, kayaks, snorkeling equipment, a couple of stand-out fitness facilities and the Spa Botánico, a five-acre Shangri-La with a Zen vibe.

And all guests get the services of a personal *embajador*, or ambassador, to cater to their needs and ferry them



ABOVE AND RIGHT BY JAYNE CLARK, USA TODAY

The Ritz-Carlton Reserve sits on 50 acres, part of a larger parcel that has 3 miles of beachfront. Guest rooms have large bathrooms with free-standing tubs.

around the grounds via golf cart, if desired.

The attendants got their training in the art of providing "invisible service" from the British Modern Butlers school. The ethic: friendly but not familiar.

So, do guests really expect their ambassador to unpack their bags?

"If they're used to that sort of thing at home, yes," says Rebecca Marquez, a friendly (but not familiar) ambassador.

Even their underwear? "With more sensitive items you ask the guest if you want them unpacked and then you use white gloves."



Spa Botánico has tranquil gardens, pools and even a couple of treehouses for massage.

'BAREFOOT' ELEGANCE BECKONS

Overheard in the bar at Mi Casa, where the mixologists are whipping up hand-crafted \$18 cocktails.

Wife: "I'd like a place here."

Husband: "I don't believe in real estate. I won't live that long."

Wife: "I will."

Husband: "Then buy it after I die."

Alejandro Helbling, a central-casting vision of a luxury resort general manager, acknowledges that the rates are bit rich for most travelers, but there's a niche market seeking a high staff-to-guest ratio.

"It's a lot of money, but people are willing to pay that for this level of luxury," he says.

This level of luxury includes spacious rooms that open onto the beach, and floor-to-ceiling doors that disappear into the walls, seamlessly melding outdoors and indoors. Some units have their own plunge pools and all have secluded outdoor showers. The designers have foregone the signature Ritz-Carlton china cabinets and Oriental rugs in favor of a more relaxed "barefoot elegance" ambience of wood and stone. The air smells of ginger and lemongrass.

Communal areas such as Mi Casa, the hotel's glass-walled signature restaurant, are in separate structures connected by walkways built over sunken gardens. Mi Casa, the latest in chef José Andrés' quiver of eateries, lends a Spanish twist to local ingredients, such as Ibérico ham with guava and oysters piña colada.

The resort's Spa Botánico is a spectacular fantasy built to appear as if

"It's a lot of money, but people are willing to pay that for this level of luxury."

Alejandro Helbling, general manager

it's been here since Livingston's era, just waiting to be unearthed by the current developers. The entry is via an "apothecary portal," a barn-like structure brimming with oversized baskets of dried herbs. Custom-designed furniture from Thailand gives it a vaguely turn-of-the-last-century ambience. Separate outdoor men's and women's areas include "purification gardens" with warm and cold pools, bucket showers and relaxation areas in splendidly landscaped settings.

Sanford Bernstein and his wife, Peggy, are nearing the end of a week-long winter escape from their home in New York. They're St. Bart's, Cap Ferrat, Seabourn Cruises people — well-traveled, well-heeled and exacting.

"I have no problem spending \$3,000 a night in a great hotel. But I don't like to pay crazy prices and get garbage," says Bernstein between bites of lox and bagel on the terrace outside Mi Casa one morning.

His impressions of this place?

"This is excess at a very reasonable price," he declares. "It's the last elegant hotel in the last elegant resort. I hope it makes it."

He does have one quibble, however.

"You know, they don't even give (loyalty) points here," he says.

DID YOU KNOW?

SKIN CARE TIPS

Remember to wear biodegradable sun protection when you go to the beach, even if you don't plan on being exposed to the sun for long periods of time (sea water reflects up to 85% of the sun radiation). This way you will take care of both yourself and the environment.

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IF YOU GO...

High-season rates at the new Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve in Puerto Rico, range from \$1,499 (plus tax and a daily \$95 resort fee) for an oceanfront room, to \$4,698 for a two-bedroom, three-bath rooftop suite with a private plunge pool. Summer rates start at \$719.

Reservations:
787-626-1100; ritzcarlton.com

MORE ONLINE
TRAVEL.USATODAY.COM

See more photos of the Dorado Beach and other luxury developments.