

# Dorado Beach puts the island's best face forward

One-of-a-kind resort puts Puerto Rico on the map of luxury, destination-wedding tourism



*The Dorado Beach lobby is an open-air space designed to give arriving guests an imposing view of the resort's features right down to its pristine beachfront. The space is mainly used as a greeting station, with any check-in procedures having been done beforehand.*

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**D**ORADO—There's high-end, and then there's the super high-end.

Picture this: You arrive in a private jet at the Isla Grande Airport in San Juan, and a Porsche Panamera or a Bentley sedan waits on the runway, ready to whisk you away.

About 30 minutes later, you arrive at a beautiful tropical paradise, complete with lush vegetation, sprawling golf courses and rustic-looking buildings off to one side, half obscured by the foliage, as your chauffeur drives the car down a narrow road.

You step off the vehicle at an open-air lobby that is dominated by an imposing pond covered with floating flowers. Walk up a short stairway to uncover another breathtaking view: buildings reminiscent of late 1940s and early 1950s glamour, flanked by wooden walkways that mingle with their natural surroundings. The view goes on, straight toward the beachfront, the breakwater and the majestic sea beyond.

There is no check-in process; all of that has already been taken care of between the staff of the hotel and a travel agency. The whole arrival is as seamless as getting home after a hard day's work, the only difference

is that this is a much nicer abode than the one you're probably accustomed to.

Welcome to the Dorado Beach, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve, a place custom-built to satisfy, if not outright exceed, the world's most demanding tastes. It is only the second Ritz-Carlton Reserve resort in the world, with the first one nestled a hemisphere away in Phulay Bay, Thailand. The Dorado Beach has been in full operation for only six months, but it has already established a reputation worldwide as one of the most exclusive resorts.

Along the way, it has placed Puerto Rico squarely on a shortlist of suitable

destinations for very wealthy and selective tourists. "People at travel agencies in New York City have told me that Puerto Rico wasn't previously on their radar until Dorado Beach opened, and now they are preparing travel packages for very important people to go to the island," said an industry source.

The Dorado Beach has also become a prime location for destination weddings. In just six months, the resort has hosted three lavish weddings, the most impressive of which took place in April at a cost of around \$5 million, and celebrities such as

Continues on next page





Continued from previous page

Marc Anthony, Eva Longoria, Khloe Kardashian, Scottie Pippen and Mary J. Blige were among those in attendance. Decorating guru Preston Bailey was in charge of the ambiance at the wedding, which involved some 10,000 flowers and countless other luxury touches.

The resort has also turned into an "it" spot for group incentive trips; achieve a quarterly sales goal at a Fortune 500 company that employs you, and a week-long stay at Dorado Beach may become your just reward.

Perhaps most importantly, Dorado Beach has effectively put forward Puerto Rico's best face to what is perhaps the most demanding tourism segment, and as a result, has significantly raised the island's profile on the industry at a global scale.

"[Most guests who stay here] are people with the wherewithal to travel anywhere in the world, and the fact that they have chosen Puerto Rico certainly says a lot," noted Graeme Benn, Ritz-Carlton's area vice president of sales & marketing for Mexico & the Caribbean.

In short, Dorado Beach has proven to be great PR, as in public relations, for Puerto Rico.

## BAREFOOT LUXURY

One of the aspects that has allowed Dorado Beach, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve to exceed occupancy expectations, at least at the very beginning, has been its legacy aspect. Despite being in operation for only six months, the new Dorado Beach is but the latest adaptation of a classic resort area with a rich and glamorous history that stretches back almost a hundred years, with names such as Laurance Rockefeller, John F. Kennedy, Joan Crawford, Dwight Eisenhower, Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio comprising part of its glorious past.

"We originally expected the great majority of guests to come from the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. mainland, but the fact is that the legacy of Dorado Beach has attracted people from all over, including the west coast of the U.S. and even people from Germany and England," said



*The different areas of the Dorado Beach have been made up to evoke the feeling of the resort's previous glory days, while simultaneously adopting several indigenous motifs and modern elements.*

Alejandro Helbling, general manager at Dorado Beach, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve.

Meanwhile, Benn said staff members have been witness to a particular "multigenerational" dynamic among many guests. "People who came here before as children are now coming back as parents or grandparents, eager to establish that emotional connection once again, and bringing their family with them."

When asked about the biggest challenge in the day-to-day operations at

the hotel, Helbling said, "we frankly didn't expect such a huge influx of people so early on. I wouldn't really call it a challenge, it's a good thing to have." He added that about 70% of guests who have stayed at the hotel have rebooked for another stay at the Dorado Beach next year.

Although most of the guests staying at the resort have come from outside the island, Helbling said its restaurant and spa offerings have seen plenty of visits from local tourists. "We also expect local visits to

pick up, now that the summer season is about to start," Benn added.

The Dorado Beach lobby occupies one end of a string of buildings located near the beachfront, with the middle segments comprising the guest rooms themselves. At the opposite end stands a beach club that is available for members, which include residents from nearby exclusive neighborhoods.

The hotel's version of a presidential suite is the Su Casa Plantation House, a structure with a distinguished history all its own. Its price tag is similarly impressive: \$25,000 will allow you a night's stay. Despite this, weeklong stays at Su Casa aren't uncommon, and a famous actor has reportedly booked the luxurious lodging for a whole month.

The success of Su Casa has prompted the resort to build two similarly impressive residences nearby, with plans to make them available for rental, as well. The resort is also expanding its already impressive golf offerings, comprised of four courses designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr.

The Dorado Beach has proved to be a boon for the region's economy, having entailed a \$324-million investment and employing around 350 people. Part of the reason for the large workforce is that the ratio of service employees for each room is between three and four, much higher than in other hotels. "The service aspect is fundamental, even more so considering we're talking about a hotel of this caliber," Benn said.

Despite making waves through the media since before its official opening, the Dorado Beach has kept fairly quiet in terms of marketing itself too aggressively. Instead, it has allowed its legacy and experience it provides to be its own promotional tools, which in part have earned the hotel several cover profiles in publications such as Travel & Leisure and American Spa.

For now, the hotel aims to keep such a low-key approach unchanged, Benn said. "One of the things we aimed for with the Dorado Beach, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve is to achieve an environment of exotic sanctuary, a very private and transformative experience. In that sense, our strategy has worked very well so far. We aren't promoting to them, we are letting them find us." ■

