

# Robb Report

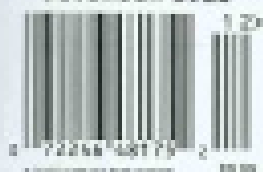
HOLIDAY ISSUE®

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## 21 Ultimate Gifts

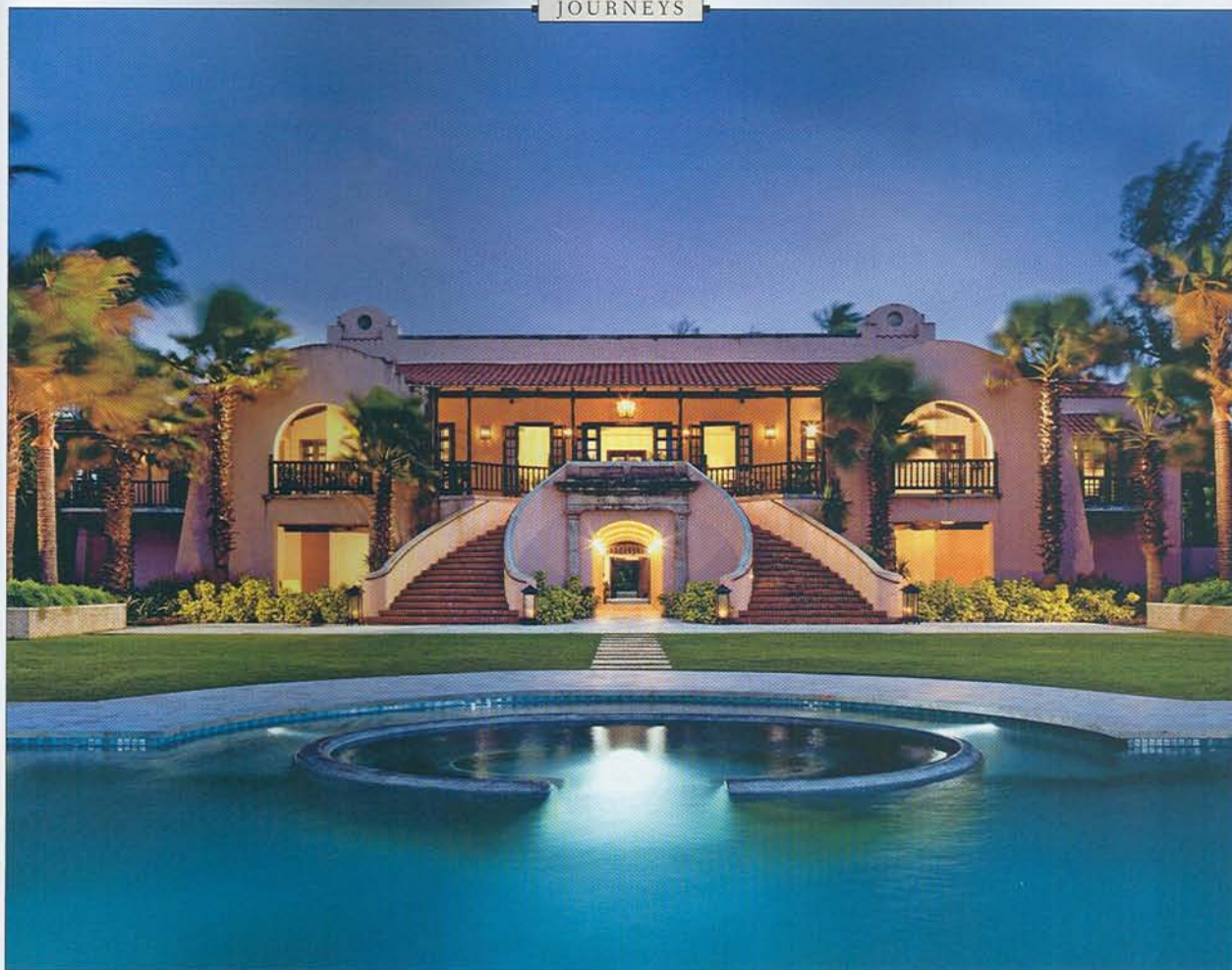


DECEMBER 2012



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## An Uncommon Wealth

*Rooted in a unique tradition of luxury, homegrown resorts in Puerto Rico are reviving the island territory as one of the Caribbean's most glamorous getaways.*

BY LISA SWEETINGHAM

**C**LARA LIVINGSTON WAS 22 years old when her father, a New York physician, passed away, leaving her in charge of his beloved La Sardinera, a 1,700-acre grapefruit-and-coconut plantation on three miles of palm-dotted coastline in northern Puerto Rico.

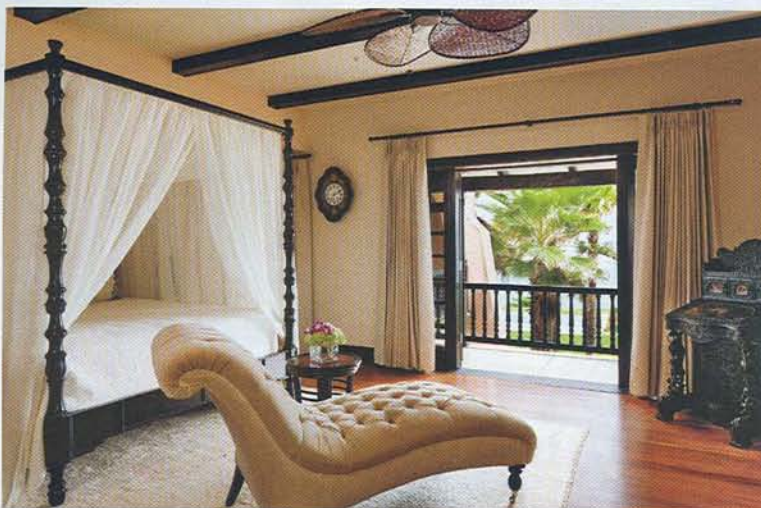
It was 1925, and the young Livingston had already earned a reputation as an intrepid spirit, flying planes and helicopters and befriending fellow aviatrix Amelia Earhart. Her Caribbean inheritance was both primitive (the workers lived on-site in one-room abodes) and remote

(transportation was by foot or horseback), but Livingston embraced the farm life. She soon moved to La Sardinera, where she built her own airstrip and, in 1928, completed a five-bedroom, 6,000-square-foot Spanish Colonial beachfront hacienda filled with furnishings and artifacts from her travels.

From her base at Su Casa, as the hacienda is now known, Livingston would ride her white horse around the plantation, overseeing the cultivation of grapefruits that were shipped to New York and London, and coconuts that

*The recently restored Su Casa, a hacienda built in 1928, is at the heart of what promises to be one of the Caribbean's premier resorts.*





were at one point used to make war-time gas masks. At night she slept with two Great Danes and a shotgun by her bedside. And though she graciously entertained guests—Earhart visited just three weeks before she disappeared over the Pacific Ocean—Livingston preferred the solitary life at her secluded hacienda.

Today, some 85 years later, Livingston's estate is a hotbed of activity. Bulldozers, trucks, and hundreds of workers move across the grounds near Su Casa, which early this year emerged from an elaborate three-year restoration. The surrounding area remains a

construction zone, as crews apply the finishing touches on what promises to be one of the Caribbean's most spectacular resorts. The project puts Su Casa, which will serve as a five-bedroom villa accommodation and event space for the resort, at the heart of a luxury renaissance in Puerto Rico that stretches from the streets of San Juan to the island's remote northwest coast. It is a familiar role for the historic hacienda.

IN THE MID-1950s, another pioneering New Yorker, Laurance S. Rockefeller (grandson of John D.), was flying over Puerto Rico scouting property for

a new resort. Having recently opened Caneel Bay on St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Rockefeller had been recruited to assist with the Puerto Rican government's Operation Bootstrap, an initiative to help create jobs and increase tourism to the island. Rockefeller was also looking to expand what would eventually become RockResorts, his collection of casually luxurious retreats that placed an emphasis on environmental preservation—a novel concept at the time. His seatmate on the plane that day, New York urban planner Robert Moses, reportedly sighted Livingston's lush plantation from the air and pointed, "There!"

Bolstered by his commitment to land preservation—and a shared love of flying—Rockefeller was able to convince the aging aviatrix and farmer Livingston to sell La Sardinera. The developer quickly set about building a luxury resort on the property, where, by his dictum, no building could be taller than a palm tree, and no tree was to be cut down without his explicit permission. Rockefeller enlisted Robert Trent Jones to design an 18-hole golf course, which debuted along with a 125-room beachfront hotel in 1958.

To celebrate the opening of the Dorado Beach Resort, Rockefeller flew 150 of his friends to Puerto Rico (every one of them a millionaire, as the legend goes). The glamorous debut of Dorado, which means "golden" in Spanish, indeed ushered in a golden era for Puerto Rican tourism.

Politicians, celebrities, and sports stars—John F. Kennedy, Elizabeth Taylor, Ava Gardner, and Joe DiMaggio among them—were frequent guests at Dorado over the years. Famed Puerto Rican golfer Chi Chi Rodriguez got his start as an assistant pro at the club. Dwight D. Eisenhower was known to stop by between world summit meetings for rounds of golf.

"I went to a Harvard management program with Edsel Ford II—the son of Henry Ford II," says current Dorado

*Su Casa's \$2 million renovation includes new gardens and pools by Bill Bensley and restorations of Clara Livingston's original furnishings.*





Beach co-owner Federico “Friedel” Stubbe, the chairman and CEO of Puerto Rico’s Prisa Group development company. “Edsel told me that his father would bring him to Dorado every year to play golf. He said that going to Dorado Beach was like going to heaven.”

The popularity of Dorado Beach, and Puerto Rico at large, was aided at least in part by politics: The same year Rockefeller was opening his tropical paradise, Fidel Castro’s forces were closing in on victory in the Cuban Revolution. As U.S. relations with Cuba ceased, Puerto Rico became

an attractive alternative for mainland Americans. With its beach resorts and lively San Juan hotels, led by the historic Condado Vanderbilt, the island emerged in the 1960s as America’s backyard playground.

Within a decade, however, Puerto Rico’s star power started to dim. A confluence of factors—the oil crisis of the 1970s, burgeoning industrialism—contributed to a shift in the commonwealth’s priorities, with political leaders becoming more interested in strengthening the industrial sector than in nurturing high-end hospitality projects. Deep tax incentives, for instance,

allowed Puerto Rico to become one of the world’s largest manufacturers of pharmaceuticals by the 1980s.

Puerto Rico’s tourism offerings, meanwhile, took a similarly populist turn. Even Dorado Beach made a push for the mass market, with Rockefeller’s resort becoming a 200-plus-room Hyatt in the late 1970s.

“We went from the romance of agriculture and tourism to the industrial age, when everything was thought about in terms of efficiency,” Stubbe says. “But when people think only about being efficient, we lose a little bit of the beauty. This is such a beautiful place, but we got too busy building big highways.”

Stubbe is among a number of visionary Puerto Rican developers who are attempting to bring the beauty—and the glamour—back to the island. Across the commonwealth, homegrown resort developments are reintroducing the high-end, low-density concept of hospitality, a movement that is positioning Puerto Rico to retake its place among the Caribbean’s elite destinations.

The St. Regis Bahia Beach, a joint venture between Puerto Rico’s Interlink Group and Muñoz Holdings, led the charge when it opened on a sandy stretch a half-hour’s drive east of San Juan in 2010. The 139-room resort, the St. Regis brand’s first in the Caribbean, includes an 18-hole golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr. and a restaurant managed by celebrity chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten.

In San Juan, the local firm International Hospitality Enterprises is attempting to revive the once-vaunted Condado Vanderbilt Hotel. Originally built in 1919, the Condado was designed by Warren and Wetmore, the architecture firm behind New York City’s Vanderbilt Hotel and Grand Central Terminal, and was a hub of Puerto Rican high society for decades. The property closed in 1997 and has sat virtually dormant ever since. But this October the Condado showed

*Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, occupies the original footprint of Laurance S. Rockefeller’s popular Puerto Rico hotel.*





signs of life, debuting a sleek restaurant headed by Puerto Rican chef Juan Jose Cuevas, as well as a sea-facing lobby bar, a glitzy cigar lounge, and banquet facilities. Guest rooms are slated to follow next year.

Down the road from the Condado, the Ritz-Carlton, San Juan, has been a luxury standard-bearer in Puerto Rico since opening in 1997. To keep pace with the island's influx of upscale properties, the 416-room hotel and casino recently finished a multimillion-dollar renovation of its guest rooms and suites, and a revamp of the spa is now under way.

"All that area in San Juan around Condado, the high-end shops like Cartier, they're all coming back," Stubbe says. "Puerto Rico has slowly come again to be a place of luxury."

Perhaps most indicative of Puerto Rico's homegrown renaissance is Royal Isabela, a cliff-top hotel, golf club, and private residential community on the island's northwest coast. The property is owned by Puerto Rican brothers Charlie and Stanley Pasarell, former



professional tennis players with deep roots in the commonwealth. The brothers and their partner, Edwin Pérez, spent some 10 years planning the development, which debuted a stunning 18-hole golf course—designed by the Pasarells and golf architect David Pfaff—in spring 2011. This year they opened 20 Hart Howerton-designed, 900-square-foot guest casitas with private decks and plunge pools. A golf pro shop, a farm-to-table-style restaurant, a library lounge and bar, and an organic farm are also up and running on the 426-acre property, which will eventually include one- to two-acre homesites overlooking the golf course

and the ocean.

The Pasarell brothers refer to Royal Isabela, formerly agricultural and cattle-herding land, as their hidden pearl. "It comes from a poem that our great-grandfather, a well-respected doctor, political figure, and writer, wrote at the turn of the century," Stanley explains. "He describes an afternoon, looking at the waves and the cliffs, and the sun is hiding in the mist like a hidden

pearl. I would imagine he was looking at this property."

IF ROYAL ISABELA is Puerto Rico's hidden pearl, then Dorado Beach is its crown jewel. Like the island at large, however, the legendary resort has endured its share of ups and downs over the decades, including unsightly expansions to the main hotel and a gradual degradation of its once-cutting-edge amenities. "What was considered luxury in the '60s is not luxury anymore," Stubbe says. "Today a Volkswagen has more luxury than a Cadillac had in the '60s. Luxury has evolved."

At Dorado, at least, Stubbe believes

*The new St. Regis Bahia Beach features an oceanfront golf course by Robert Trent Jones Jr., whose father put Puerto Rico on the golfing map.*

MARCO RICCA





The cliff-top casitas and golf course are highlights at the Pasarell brothers' Royal Isabela.

luxury should evolve in a manner consistent with Rockefeller's original vision. "Following up on Rockefeller is a huge challenge," he says. "He had a master plan for hotels, housing, agriculture—that kind of thinking didn't exist in the development community at the time."

Led by Stubbe's Prisa Group, Dorado Beach is in the midst of a sweeping overhaul intended to bring the resort into the 21st century while reviving its Rockefeller roots. Robert Trent Jones Jr. has been enlisted to revamp each of the four 18-hole golf courses his late father eventually built at the property. (The East Course reopened last November after Jones Jr.'s redo.) A new \$12 million water park is one of several other upgrades to Dorado, which spans a number of neighborhoods with private estates and condominiums. (Golfer Rodriguez is one of many prominent Puerto Ricans, including former major league slugger Carlos Delgado and

crooner Ricky Martin, who own homes at Dorado.)

But the pièce de résistance at Dorado—and of Puerto Rico's luxury renaissance at large—is the new beachfront retreat on the site of Rockefeller's original hotel. Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve (see the Ultimate Gift Guide's "Meier de la Mar," page 188), is scheduled to open this December with 100 guest rooms and 14 one-bedroom suites spread across 50 acres of lagoons, tropical forest, and beachfront. The first of Ritz-Carlton's exclusive Reserve properties in the Americas (the original opened in Thailand in 2010), the property will also feature 13 two- to four-bedroom private residences (priced from \$2.5 million to \$5.3 million) with private pools and ocean views; a beach club; a 5-acre spa with tree-house treatment platforms under the forest canopy; an 11-mile nature trail and an eco-adventures program led by Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ambassadors of the

JOANN DOST







Fifteen years after closing, the Condado Vanderbilt started showing signs of life in October.

Environment; and a restaurant by renowned chef José Andrés, his first outside the continental United States.

Su Casa, which housed the Hyatt's fine-dining restaurant at Dorado (and for a period of time hosted a nightclub on its roof), will function primarily as the resort's VIP villa for guests and as a site for weddings and other special events. To revive Livingston's hacienda, Dorado's owners enlisted Puerto Rican architect Otto Octavio Reyes Casanova and the Dallas-based interior design firm Wilson Associates. The \$2 million project used photos and architectural plans from the 1920s as guidelines in an attempt to keep the villa historically accurate. The designers also restored much of Livingston's original furniture—including a 250-year-old Peruvian writing desk and a hand-carved abalone-embellished table—while adding features such as two new swimming pools and gardens designed by the Bangkok-based architect Bill Bensley.

For Stubbe, the painstaking process behind Su Casa's restoration is the proper path for Puerto Rico. "In the past, the best road to build was the kind that took you from point A to B the fastest," he says. "Today? I'd say the best road is the one that takes you from point A to B in a more special way, in a more pleasurable way."

Stubbe points to small details at Dorado that underscore his point, such as the bright-red stop signs along the golf-cart path. "It's a very clear, red STOP, but we added *please* under it," he says with a laugh. "We now

have 28 new bird species, because we have a full-time biologist who plants seeds that attract birds. We have a doctor of oceanography who monitors the fish and the coral reefs. And we work with the local fishing community to help them change their habits, to make the ocean a better place."

Stanley Pasarell and his partners are equally sensitive to conservation. Royal Isabela is home to some 25 varieties of indigenous trees, from oaks and banyans to sea grapes and the small, vanilla-perfumed higuierillos. During the construction process, Pasarell walked the grounds with his design partners to make sure each casita was built around the trees, and each fairway was positioned in conjunction with—not over and on top of—the rocks, plants, and other natural surroundings.

"We want to create a new type of community like nothing else that's been done in Puerto Rico, but ultimately, we want to make sure we preserve the coastline and the cliffs," Pasarell says. "So we have to develop Royal Isabela in an economically sustainable way—and make sure the project doesn't fall into the hands of someone else who wants to sell condominiums up and down the coast." ■

*The Condado Vanderbilt Hotel, [www.condadovanderbilthotel.com](http://www.condadovanderbilthotel.com); Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, [www.ritzcarlton.com/doradobeach](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/doradobeach); The Ritz-Carlton, San Juan, [www.ritzcarlton.com/sanjuan](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/sanjuan); Royal Isabela, [www.royalisabela.com](http://www.royalisabela.com); The St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort, Puerto Rico, [www.stregis.com/bahiabeach](http://www.stregis.com/bahiabeach)*