

*Hispaniola's latest
resort, Amanera, at
dusk, perched along
a cliff overlooking
the Playa Grande*

DOMINICAN DYNAMO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
MARTIN KREUZER



The clean-lined design, the top-notch cuisine, even the world-class golf course are beguiling, says Peter Swain, but what sets Amanera apart is the inimitable atmosphere

Welcome home," says Albert Mertz, general manager of Aman's new hideaway in the Dominican Republic, echoing the long-standing salutation that greets guests at each of the group's 30 properties. Home, of course, is a place that is supremely comfortable and secure, where one is surrounded by friendly faces and every whim is catered for – ideally, before it is even expressed. Above all, it's a state of mind. And so is this new gem on Hispaniola's north coast. When visiting – and indeed, experiencing – most new resorts, the headline would be a list of the amenities on offer, together with details of the location. With Amans, the variety of the former and excellence and

distinctiveness of the latter are simply a given. What really sets the brand apart is the ability to create a space, both physical and metaphorical, that rejuvenates the mind as well as the body.

And it's no different at this 809ha sybaritic retreat, created under the direction of British-based architect John Heah. Take the resort's hub, the Casa Grande, perched atop a 20m cliff with stunning sea vistas: it could easily house a modern art gallery – this is bravura, and one expects soon-to-be award-winning, design. All towering organic pillars, grand staircases and hanging bridges, with floor-to-ceiling glass around the ground-floor dining room and a lounging area on the top floor open to the breeze, under an imposing flat concrete biodiverse roof, the building has something of Niemeyer and even Frank Lloyd Wright about it. →



Clockwise, from above: one of Amanera's spacious casitas; the deserted sands of Playa Grande; the resort's stylish bar; surfing is among the many activities on offer; sun loungers by the pool affording a grand sea view; the walkway leading to the entrance; tuna ceviche



Facing page: club professional Julio Santos, who still occasionally plays on the Latin American Tour, on one of Playa Grande's ten oceanside holes





A touchstone feature is undoubtedly the infinity edge waterway that runs around the higher level, creating a safety barrier, yet blurring inside and outside space. Gorgeous by day, the building really comes alive at night. The lighting design by George Sexton of MoMA fame subtly enhances the *mise-en-scène*. "When you were examining cigars in the cigar lounge humidor, was there enough light?" Sexton asks. "Just," I suggest. "Well, that's perfect." And indeed it is. In the well-stocked library, the sunken bar, dining room and B&B Italia-chaired seating areas, the night-time ambience is sophisticated yet simple, with perfect harmony the result. From the beach below, at dusk, the Casa Grande appears to hang somewhere between the heavens and earth.

The 24 one-bedroom *casitas* and the two-bedroom Bay View Casa are stylistically miniature versions of the Casa Grande. Spacious sitting rooms, bedrooms and generous bathrooms are separated from 10m private pools by commodious terraces under overhanging eaves, all with a clear view of the ocean. Lutron controls set the

mood and close the minimalist shutters – clutter of any sort is absent. Featuring local flora, landscaping between *casitas* ensures both homey seclusion and a sense of oneness with the local ecosystem. Zen personified.

Amanjunkies will be reassured that Amanera, like its sister resorts, has friendly and refined service, high-calibre international cuisine and endless private space. They may be more surprised that it boasts its own golf course, the first property in the group to do so. Originally designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr, the 7,085-yard (6,479m) course has been extensively remodelled by his son, Rees Jones, and snakes along the ocean cliffs, with ten holes playing next to or over the crashing surf below. With its wide fairways, which encourage ambitious driving, and forced carries over water, as on the 18th, to pristine USGA-spec greens, it isn't just the most scenic walk in this part of the country, it's an outstanding test of golf.

Low handicappers teeing off from the tips face several risk/reward dogleg clifftop challenges, but golfers of all standards will enjoy what is essentially a

high-end resort course. Some destinations have 18 holes worth playing if one is there already – this Playa Grande course is worth flying in to discover. A new clubhouse will round out the facilities at the course, which runs up the coast towards the stunning and practically deserted Playa Grande beach: a mile (1.6km) of pristine sand next to the churning Atlantic, perfect for a variety of water sports. A bracing stroll to the far end of the shoreline brings one to the small, independently owned, colonial-style Playa Grande Beach Club, where the beer is cold and the welcome warm.

Amanera's own Modernist beach club, at the foot of the cliffs, a four-minute walk below the *casitas*, has an authentic pizza oven and serves an exotic range of cocktails, the perfect locale for a spot of power-tanning while watching the local raptors wheel lazily overhead. The kids' club nearby is a welcome addition for multigenerational Aman buffs, while sporty →





Facing page: local cigar maker Juan Alberto smoking a sizeable example of his work; clockwise from left: one of his hand-rolled creations in production; preparing an apéritif in the resort's bar; the Casa Grande, illuminated by George Sexton's splendid lighting

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types will appreciate the floodlit tennis courts, gym and opportunity for big game fishing offshore. After their exertions, they'll be able to avail themselves of a host of relaxing treatments in a colonial-style structure with a pair of treatment rooms. Guests tempted to create their own permanent sanctuary can even buy one of the 20-odd two- to five-bedroom villas currently being built around the course.

Amans pride themselves on engaging with the surrounding environment and, indeed, communities. This outpost is no exception. Local guides are on hand to accompany guests on foot, mountain bike or horseback up into the rainforest of the Cordillera Septentrional hills immediately behind the resort, where exotica such as hummingbirds, hermit crabs and bright-orange Caribbean daggerwing butterflies live alongside ancient mango, lemon and cashew-nut trees, all accompanied by the music of the forest provided by cicadas, tree frogs and numerous unseen birds. There are even plans to grow cacao and coffee on site.

Another local product is tobacco – the country's cigar industry has a reputation to rival Cuba's. Local aficionado and cigar maker Juan Alberto regularly graces the hotel, introducing guests to the exquisite craftsmanship involved in the production of the finest hand-rolled cigars. "Which is the best cigar in the world?" I enquire. "The one you like the most," he replies. Of course. In fact, this might almost pass as Amanera's philosophy: it's not simply about delivering gourmet fare, great sport or total tranquillity in uncompromisingly stylish surroundings, but providing the right experience precisely when and exactly how a guest wants it. Just like home, really. aman.com ●

