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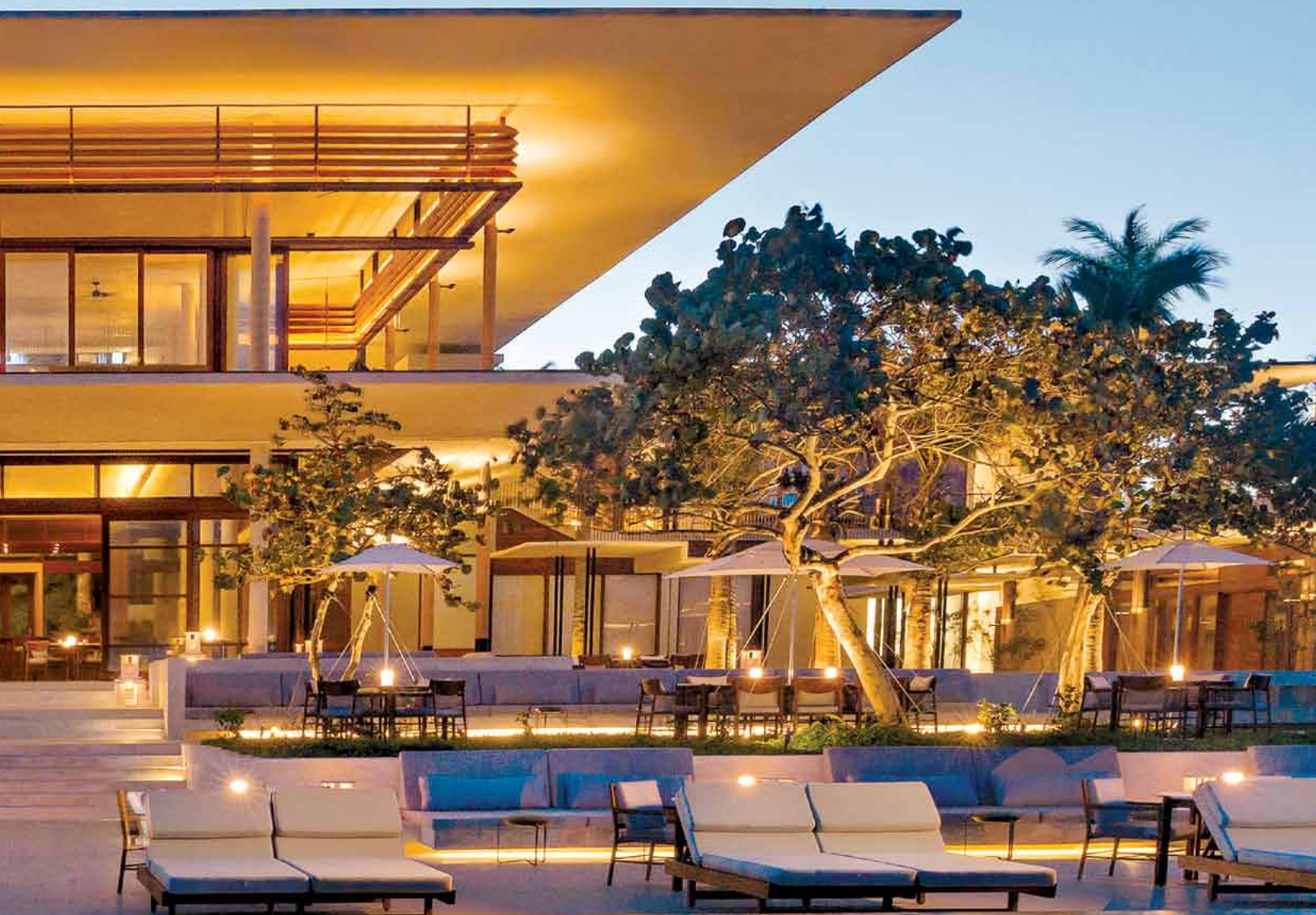
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US \$7.95



welcome home

THIS SIMPLE SALUTATION FROM ROCCO BOVA,
GENERAL MANAGER OF AMAN'S NEW RESORT IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC,
SETS AN IMPECCABLE YET INTIMATE TONE



"HOME" IS A PLACE WHERE ONE CAN RELAX IN PRIVATE, WHERE ABSOLUTE COMFORT IS A GIVEN AND ONE IS SURROUNDED BY FRIENDLY FACES. Above all, it's a state of mind. And so is Amanera.

This brand new gem on the Dominican Republic's north coast is a welcome alternative to the popular resorts at Punta Cana over in the southeast. Amanera is also part of what many seasoned travellers believe to be the most exclusive hotel group in the world.

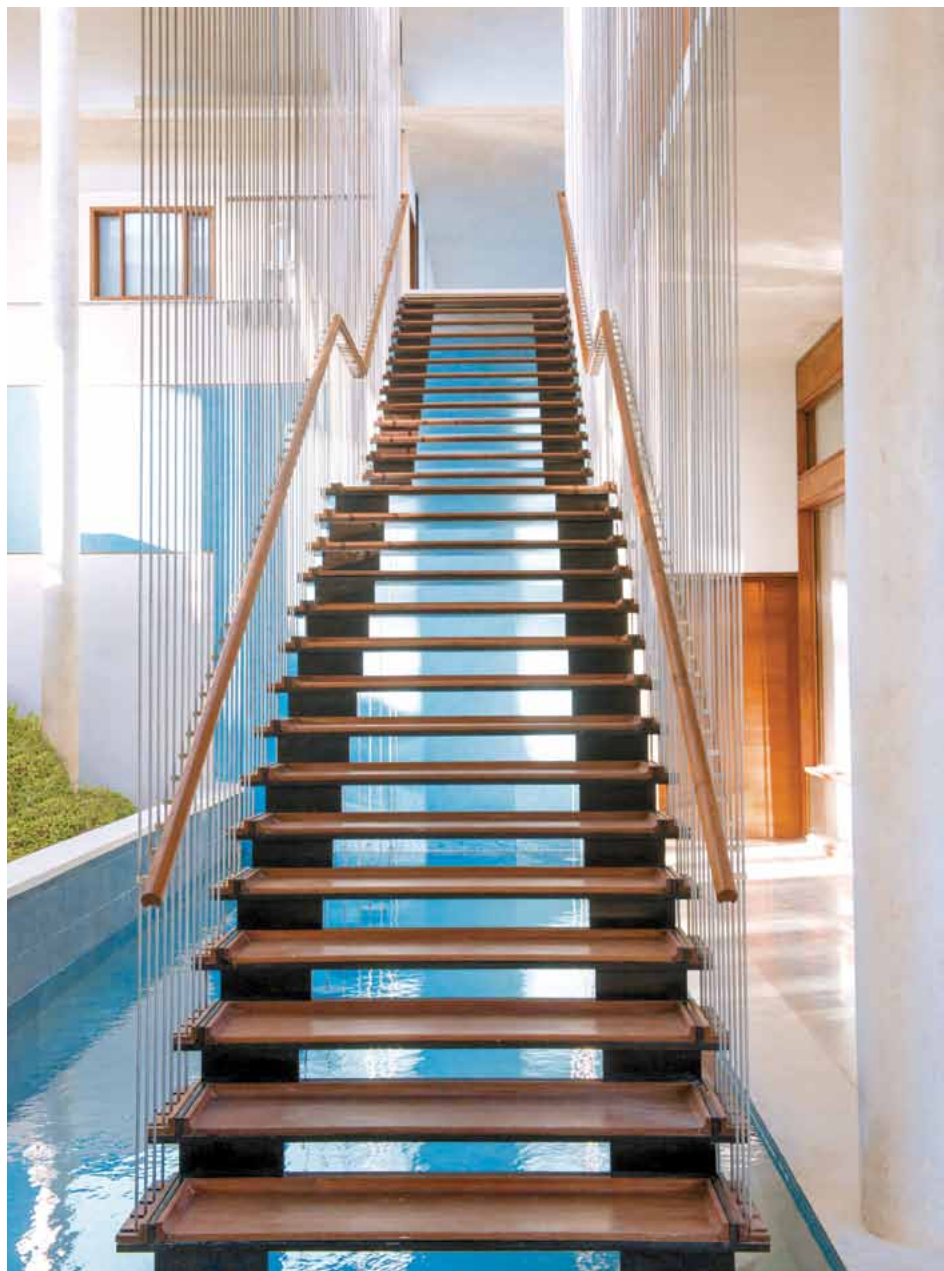
Adrian Zecha founded Aman in 1988 with his first resort, Amanpuri, in Phuket. Over the years, the collection has expanded to 30 hotels worldwide, most having no more than 50 villas or suites boasting unparalleled luxury, refinement and service. Zen-like minimalism in a sea of tranquillity is the hallmark of the brand, and Amanera, the second Aman in the Caribbean after Amanyaara in the Turks and Caicos, is just the latest iteration of that philosophy.



Between Cabarete and Samana, the 25-casita property is dominated by John Heah's magnificent clifftop Casa Grande, which houses the restaurant, bar, library, cigar lounge and numerous chilling areas, all under an imposing flat bio-diverse roof. The walls, where there are any, are glass, and the tall tapering columns reflective of the surrounding coconut palms, but for me the most distinctive feature is the infinity-edge waterway running around the higher level, creating a safety barrier while blurring inside and outside space. Impressive by day, the sensitively lit mise-en-scène is magical after dark.

This is signature modern architecture—the structure could easily house an art gallery. Furniture is mostly B&B Italia, so stylish and comfortable; the bar is sunken and library well stocked, while the cuisine is international and suitably haute. Vistas out over the sea, along the mile-long Playa Grande littoral to the east, and the newly refurbished golf course to the west, are both exhilarating and soothing.

Between the Casa Grande and the 60-foot high cliffs overlooking the cobalt sea, the pool deck is straight out of a *Vogue* fashion shoot. In fact, each of the 24 one- and two-bedroom casitas or villas and the single two-bedroom has its own 30-foot pool, surrounded by enough soft landscaping to ensure privacy while still promoting gorgeous views of the beach.





TOP LEFT Casa Grande at dusk
 FAR LEFT Hanging staircase,
 as if floating on nothing
 ABOVE Main pool deck overlooking
 the beach
 LEFT Blurring inside and outside space

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A spacious sitting room, bedroom, lavish bathroom and commodious terrace under overhanging eaves are stylistically smaller versions of the Casa Grande, with home automation setting the lighting mood, and clutter of any sort notably absent. Well, okay, that's not exactly like my home, but it's how I dream it could be. "Amanjunkies," as they're known, will be familiar with the set-up, if not the Dominican Republic version of it. They will be more surprised, however, that the resort has a golf course, the first in the group's history.

Playa Grande was originally designed by the doyen of golf architects, Robert Trent Jones Sr. Over the years it fell into disrepair, but has now been refurbished and in some places rerouted by his son, Rees Jones, to wonderful effect. No fewer than 10 of the 18 holes play next to or over the crashing surf below, so it's a charming walk even without the clubs. With them, the 7,085-yard course is quite simply a modern classic.

Playing from the back tees, good golfers face several daunting risk/reward drives over the water—high handicappers may choose to play around such hazards. Most fairways are quite generous, and the relatively flat greens in pristine condition, so all in all I would describe this as a high-end resort course which can be enjoyed by players of any standard. If game improvement is your bag, there's a spacious driving range and a sympathetic pro, Julio Santos, an international tournament player in his own right, to help iron out those annoying kinks. So, golfing nirvana.

ABOVE Casita living room with ocean view

RIGHT Casita private pool and deck

BELOW FAR RIGHT Minimalist bathroom

BELOW RIGHT Glass walls in open-plan bedroom



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ABOVE Clifftop Robert Trent Jones course

LEFT Mile-long Playa Grande

RIGHT ABOVE Riding along the beach

RIGHT Surfers take a break



Other activities on hand include floodlit tennis, a gym, occasional yoga retreats and, as you would expect, a variety of water sports. The Modernist beach club, just a two-minute stroll down from the casitas, is the centre of the action as well as being in a shady spot for a pizza from the authentic brick oven washed down by one of the expert mixologist's inventive cocktails. Friendly staff at the kids' club provides entertainment for the young ones.

As well as swimming, surfing and the like, Playa Grande is a scenic walking beach. It took me 20 minutes to wander along the creamy clean sand up to the far end where I discovered the small, colonial-style Playa Grande Beach Club, where the beer was cold and welcome warm.

Which brings us to the size of the Amanera estate and beauty of the local ecosystem. The whole enterprise is 2,170 acres, with no less than seven miles of beach frontage, nearly all still in a virgin state. One of the particular delights of staying here is to hike, horseback ride or cycle up into the hills immediately behind the hotel in the company of a local guide.

The forest of the Cordillera Septentrional foothills harbours all manner of exotica, from hummingbirds, hermit crabs and bright-orange daggerwing butterflies to ancient mango, papaya, lemon and cashew-nut trees. The harmony created by unseen cicadas, tree frogs and numberless songbirds is not dissimilar to the soothing soundtrack employed during the massage you can enjoy after your exertions.

The Dominican Republic grows cacao and coffee, so Amanera plans one day to make its own chocolate and home-grown espresso. The other local product with a worldwide reputation is tobacco, with DR cigars rivalling those from Cuba in some aficionados' opinion. Local producer Juan Alberto regularly visits the hotel, putting on quite a show as he demonstrates the exquisite craftsmanship involved in the production of the finest hand-rolled cigars.

Now, good sticks, as devotees call them, are best left to mature for several months after rolling, so although it's fun to puff on a freshly fashioned Alberto special, the cigar lounge, which is itself one giant humidor, actually has finer smokes. The barman will even match a vintage rum to your favoured cigar. The way Amanera balances these sophisticated



pleasures with a sense of laid-back calm is, for this writer, a winning combination.

The hotel opened only last December and a few elements are still coming together, notably the spa and new golf clubhouse. Thirty two- to five-bedroom villas are also being built around the course for those tempted to buy a permanent residence here.

Adventurous types wanting to explore further afield can go sport fishing from one of the local villages or just stroll around the colourful streets on market day. But to be honest, most guests find the resort and its many attractions so seductive, they seldom stray far from "home."

And what a home it is: gourmet fare, fine sport, tranquillity in stylish surroundings, and friendly service from Rocco Bova and his team promoting a beguiling blend of experiences to rejuvenate both mind and body. From the beach below, at dusk, the Casa Grande appears suspended somewhere between sky and sea. This is indeed a heavenly place.M

Amanera is a 60-minute drive from both Puerta Plata (POP) and Samaná El Catey (AZS) airports, with direct connections to North and South America, other islands in the region and Europe. The hotel has its own limo service to transfer guests direct to the resort.

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