



purchased roughly 30 square miles of undeveloped land in the eastern end of the Dominican Republic. A year later, a young Dominican entrepreneur named Frank R. Rainieri entered the fold, and he's credited with leading the initiative to develop the land for tourism purposes. It began modestly with the small Punta Cana Club hotel around 1971. As the Punta Cana area grew as a tourist destination, so did road and air access to the region. The 1984 opening of the Punta Cana International Airport brought with it the distinction of being the first privately owned international airport in the world.

The airport also is notable for being a short drive from the Punta Cana Resort & Club, which today includes a spa, a full-service marina, one finished golf course (with two more opening in 2010), two hotels, four residential communities, five bars, seven restaurants and 18 rental villas.

The degree to which Punta Cana has changed and grown is not lost on Rainieri.

"When I came, there was nothing — just jungle," he says. "[This is] something that we have been dreaming [of] for many years, and we have been achieving step by step."

Residents of Punta Cana include fashion icon Oscar de la Renta and singer Julio Iglesias. Both are co-owners of Grupo Punta Cana, the resort's parent company, along with Khed and Rainieri.

Punta Cana's communities offer elegant estates overlooking the Caribbean Sea and the resort's golf courses. Home sites start at around 19,000 square feet in the Hacienda community, which has its own golf course, due to open in 2010. Tortuga Bay has more than 100 homes on the first nine holes of the La Cana Golf Course, and Arrecife has a few homes available on the back nine of La Cana (sites range from about 24,000 square feet to 43,000 square feet).

Then there's Corales, which is where Rainieri, de la Renta, Iglesias and dancer/actor Mikhail Baryshnikov call home. About 126 homes are eventually planned for this exclusive residential area, and sites range from about 40,000 square feet to 59,000 square feet.

"One of the things that people need more today is quality of life," Rainieri says. "We live in cities where you rush, and you have everything and don't have anything. Over here, we have quality of life because we can enjoy every moment, every minute, in a very friendly and open ambience."

Aside from the exclusivity of Corales, another main draw to the community is its golf

course, which is scheduled to open in early 2010.

Jay Overton, a former PGA Tour player, whose golf resort experience includes Innisbrook in Florida and Pinehurst in North Carolina, was so overwhelmed by Corales that he came out of retirement this year to become its golf director.

"I could not turn down the opportunity to put this golf course on my resume," he says.

"There are probably 2,600 or 2,700 acres of pure golf courses [at Corales]. That in itself you can build three golf courses on. It's that much acreage."

"You never see the dedication of land like this," Overton adds. "The golfers will never disturb the homes; the homes will never disturb the golfers."

The Corales course was designed by Tomazio, who had a hand in designing 14 of the 100 courses that made *Golf Digest's* list of America's Greatest Golf Courses for 2009-10. Players can look forward to the ocean-side setting and the challenge of the course's final three holes, which have been dubbed The Devil's Elbow.

As the course was built, all foliage that was affected by the construction was moved to another part of Punta Cana and replanted, according to German Gomez Pellerano, the resort's public relations coordinator. The same will be done with plants and trees as the remainder of the Corales homes are built.

It's all part of a conscious effort by the Punta Cana Ecological Foundation to retain the natural beauty of the land. Established in 1994, the foundation works with Harvard University and other colleges to develop and implement new ecological programs.

Increasing awareness of how protecting the

environment relates to the future of tourism in the Dominican Republic is one of the biggest challenges for the nonprofit organization, which is endowed with a 1,500-acre ecological park and reserve.

"We have worked hard to educate our employees, our visitors, the surrounding hotels and businesses and the surrounding communities about the importance of sustainable tourism," says Jake Khed, Grupo Punta Cana's environmental director and the great-nephew of Theodore W. Khed.

Grupo Punta Cana was recognized by the World Travel & Tourism Council with the 2009 Tourism for Tomorrow Award in the Destination Stewardship category for its protection of natural and cultural heritage as well as its environmentally friendly business practices.

Jake Khed says some of the ecological foundations' goals for 2010 include the implementation of an integrated coastal management plan for boaters and fishermen, land development that improves water quality of the coastal area and expanding environmental education programs.

Presentation of Dominican culture also is a priority of Grupo Punta Cana. There's an art gallery in Punta Cana Village that features regular exhibitions by Dominican artists, and once a year, the resort holds a carnival celebration for both tourists and locals.

According to Khed, there are ten museums to build a museum near the airport that would celebrate both the natural and cultural history of the Dominican Republic.

More information about Punta Cana Resort & Club is available at www.puntacana.com. □

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Welcome to Paradise

A LUSH, GREEN CARIBBEAN DESTINATION WHERE ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION IS A PRIORITY OFFERS A RELAXING PLACE TO HAVE A VACATION HOME. BY CHRIS M. JUNIOR

When you traveled as much as explorer Christopher Columbus did in the 15th century, flowing praise of yet another tropical island may not come easily.

However, in 1492, after years of sailing the ocean blue, once the famed explorer dropped eyes on the scenic Caribbean land masses of Hispaniola, he pen fair dripped with admiring prose—recording in his journal the sighting of "a beautiful island paradise with high forested mountains and large river valleys."

Since then, Hispaniola has seen its share of major changes—perhaps none bigger than the Dominican Republic's independence from Haiti in February 1844. As for the landscape, Colum-

bus would be happy to know that it can still be described as picturesque, certainly in the eastern region of the Dominican Republic, specifically the area known as Punta Cana. It is home to the Punta Cana Resort & Club, and it has all of the features you would expect from an isolated island resort: first-class accommodations, amenities and activities, not to mention quite beaches.

What sets Punta Cana apart from the resort pack is its respect for and preservation of the environment and local culture, and those important principles are reflected in all aspects of the community, including its golf courses, vacation villas and luxurious estates.

The birth of the Punta Cana resort goes back to 1969, when a group of American investors including New York attorney Theodore W. Khed

TOP: Sit right on the beach in Punta Cana. BOTTOM: Move from bed to beach in a few short steps