



Puerto Rico's Dorado Beach Is a Bit of Bali, Three Hours from Home

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The resort has been reborn in the Caribbean following Hurricane Maria.



Puerto Rico is back. Fly to San Juan on any day, on any of the easy, three-hours-or-less flights from New York City and across the East Coast, and you'll see far fewer emergency blue-roof tarps on the island. The capital city has returned to true form—loud, lively, with Uber drivers sitting in traffic and locals weaving in and

out of shops and restaurants (lights a'blazing). And the good vibes carry beyond Old San Juan, down an open highway west of the city, along side roads lined with palms. Forty minutes later, you arrive—practically stumble upon—Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, a newly reopened resort on 1,400 acres of land with nearly two miles of private beach. The resort's grounds, hard hit by Hurricane Maria last year, have seen the skillful reintroduction of more than 300,000 native plants. This veritable botanical garden, in an astonishing variety of shades of green, means there's new life here—a hopeful metaphor for what's happening across the island.

The road to Dorado isn't paved in gold, but Dorado Beach has enjoyed a handful of blissed-out comparisons over the years: as a "Caribbean Shangri-La" and a "playground for the rich and famous." We prefer to think of it as a slice of Bali in the Caribbean—verdant, vibrant, and calming. Laurance S. Rockefeller opened it to the public in 1958, and it quickly became a hot spot for the world's who's who—Joan Crawford, Ava Gardner, Phyllis Diller, even J.F.K.—through the 1960s and '70s. It fell into disrepair in the '80s until civil engineer Federico “Friedel” Stubbe saw future potential for the area and took over in 1990. With his marriage to Carolina Figueredo, a feisty Venezuelan museologist and founder of Arte Fits in 2009—a non-profit organization dedicated to site-specific art installations and local education—Dorado blossomed. The resort is now both sculpture garden and gallery, outside and inside.

Frequent Stubbe trips over the years to north Asia, mostly Beijing, Shanghai, and Tokyo, have helped them amass their own, striking private art collection by the likes of the Japanese ceramics artist Takashi Hinoda and his semi-human porcelain sculptures, and Lina Tianmiao with her vibrant textile installations from China. The private Stubbe home on the property, where Friedel and Carolina live with their two dogs, is in itself a masterpiece. Completed in 2011, a comprehensive re-do of an existing structure by local architect Heriberto J. Carbia, the home is now a light-filled series of glass boxes (think Apple's flagship Fifth Avenue store in New York City, multiplied) with perfectly framed views of golf greens, palm trees, and white-capped sea.

Beyond the Stubbe residence, oversized contemporary art pieces are scattered around the grounds. Among them, a collection of geometric cubes by Puerto Rican artist Carlos Mercado, a mermaid chiseled from stone by Milton Rosa Ortiz, and unusual placements by Enoc Perez—all of which feel surprisingly at home here. Ask resident artist Sofia Arsuaga for a guided tour of the works, many by emerging Puerto Rican artists, which will often include a side trip to actual artists' studios nearby.

Most sculptures and all major structures survived Maria, so the post-storm renovation, while essential for fauna recovery, has been otherwise cosmetic: All of the 114 guest rooms were refreshed with new art and soft furnishings, the Spa Botánico has been completely remodeled, and each of the resort dining spots have new concepts and menus. A heightened focus on wellness has also been wrapped into the experience, with updated equipment in the fitness center, and an entirely new spa cuisine concept. Our favorites digs are still those at ground level, with small,

private pools and lawns running straight to the sand—the in-pool dining service, though, is our new reason for loving them (all on-site restaurants offer room service on floating trays).

As your food floats toward you, know that Dorado Beach isn't just about escape—the resort gives back to its staff, their families, and the extended community, as the healing process continues.

Don't miss...

the resort's five-acre Spa Botánico. Enter under a multi-limbed Banyan tree, where a grand apothecary is stacked with local botanicals for health, beauty, and culinary use. Book a treatment in one of two open-air treehouses, followed by a moment or two in the Purification Gardens for warm and cool pools, waterfall showers, and steam pavilions.

a tee time at one of three Dorado Beach TPC Golf Courses, or a walk along the 11-mile Rockefeller Nature Trail.

the infinity edge Positivo Pool and Cabanas (for adults). Families with kids, all welcome, should check out the Encanto Beach Club for a series of swim and splash areas.

the resort's secret aviation history. Dorado Beach was settled in 1905 by Alfred T. Livingston, a grapefruit and coconut exporter. Management transferred to his daughter Clara upon his death. She built a landing strip on the property, and became the 11th female pilot in the world in 1927—plus a friend of visitor Amelia Earhart. The airstrip, closed since 1996, is now a themed children's playground with suspended airplanes and Livingston memorabilia.