

VOLANTE **Elyse Glickman** finds an incredibly accommodating resort in Punta Cana, in the Dominican Republic



Having the Finest time

Elyse Glickman is US west coast editor of *Lucire*.

FINEST PUNTA CANA in the Dominican Republic is not designed for guests to have it all. It's all about giving each guest precisely what they want in a beach resort vacation. And what constitutes the perfect Caribbean getaway differs between couples, a girls' getaway group, families with kids or a business retreat participant. There's a lot going on within this relatively small compound, with 455 all-suite rooms, 13 restaurants,

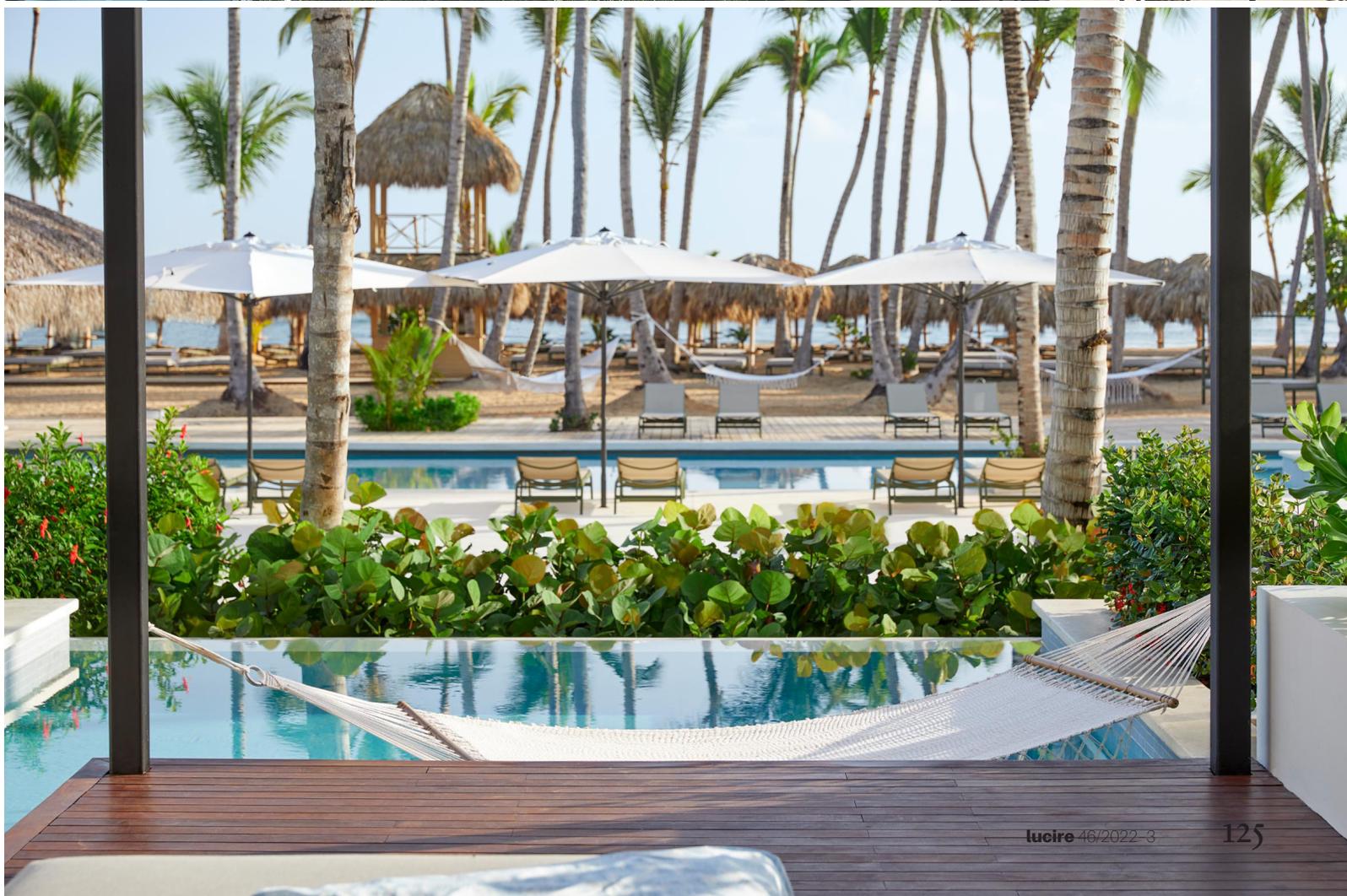
16 bars, a beautifully conceived spa and a scenic and well maintained beach.

While the Excellence Collection, its parent company, has enjoyed great success with eight luxury all-inclusive properties in México, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic brimming with either Caribbean village charm or trendy "lifestyle" appeal (the hospitality trend first introduced by W Hotels a couple of decades ago), Finest Punta Cana

provides every guest a clean slate upon which to craft a personalized no-fuss, high-luxury vacation by design—figuratively and literally. Finest in Playa Mujeres, México (opened in 2015), its predecessor, hit its mark so well in addressing changing travellers' tastes that upping things up a notch at the Punta Cana property made sense.

As the opening of Finest Punta Cana was delayed due to the pandemic (Oc-

Opposite page: Excellence Club private beach. **Below:** Excellence Club in the late afternoon. **Bottom:** Finest Club beachfront suite with private pool.



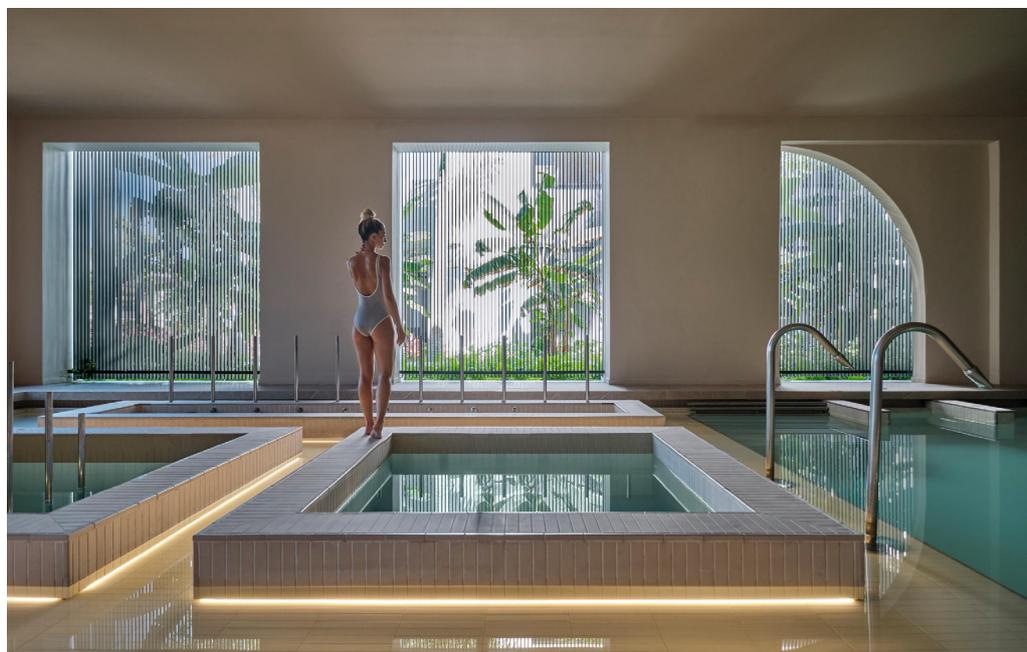


Above: Aerial view of the Finest Punta Cana resort. **Below:** Enjoying hydrotherapy in the spa,

tober 2021), the Excellence Collection’s in-house architects and interior design teams used the extra time to build in extra elements of sustainability into the suites and the rest of the resort. During the Finest Punta Cana’s construction, the team fine-tuned and improved upon the small details that made Finest Playa Mujeres a big hit. Paper menus for all of the restaurants and spa menus are now consolidated and accessible on the Excellence Collection app, while plastic straws and other non-sustainable items used in “grab-and-go” service have been removed or replaced with reusable or recyclable options.

The first impression a guest will have that it’s more minimalist in design than they may expect. Rather than resemble a giant villa, a theme park or a chain resort we’ve seen at beach destinations worldwide, the structure looks like a collection of empty frames. The lobby is also simple, with simple décor rendered in earthy hues, including the chandelier that greets new arrivals. The clean, symmetrical architecture also sets off beautifully manicured courtyards and ocean views. While there is continuity running through sides of the property, in terms of the architecture and interior design, the threshold in the lobby connecting the family-friendly and adults-only sections shows how masterfully planned the resort is as a whole.

Inside the guest rooms, subtle but clever sustainability features add to the breezy, effortless feel of a Finest Resort stay on both sides of the property. Each mid-century-modern-attired dwelling has a fully digitized system controlling lights, air conditioning, and ‘Do not disturb’ and housekeeping signage, as well as a handy cabinet where guests can stash



dishes and glasses after finishing room service meals so they are out of the way and easier for housekeeping staff to grab without entering the guest’s private space.

The overall concept also works for individuals in larger groups (such as wedding parties and business retreats), who will have differing domestic arrangements. There are also upgraded Finest Club and Excellence Club options that encompass decadent build-outs ranging from walk-in pools or in-room Jacuzzis to Bulgari bath products and top-shelf liquor and a wider selection of premium spirits and mini-bar items.

The jewel of the resort is the One Spa, which sits within the threshold of the lobby connecting the Finest and Excellence wings. Its marquée experience (complimentary for those purchasing the Club packages) is its new hydrotherapy circuit, which precedes a treatment or

can be enjoyed on its own. This sensory immersion packs in dry and wet saunas, stations with different water features designed to massage and relax different parts of the body, hot and cold pools, and its own built-in “ice bucket challenge” which feels amazing after the prescribed amount of time in the saunas.

Unique interior design elements within the spa also set it apart from those at other resorts. These include a separate kids’ spa with its own special treatment and manicure menu (including Mommy and Me packages), a deliciously girly set of plush pink rooms for bridal parties, and a spa “kitchen” where one can mix and match ingredients based on one’s preferred treatments. For wedding parties, bridesmaids’ gatherings and other occasions, one can arrange a feast of fruits, pastries, and champagnes in a private post-treatment area.



Like the guest suites, other small details make this spa extra-special. For example, each of the nine treatment rooms' entries is adorned with a set of mandalas. As you enter, the practitioner has you choose a design that speaks to you, and the message appearing on the flip side of it becomes the spiritual focus during the treatment.

Fitness and wellness activities run the gamut from yoga and weight training with personal trainers, to a full blown-fitness gym, slightly irreverent pool fitness classes, basketball, tennis and archery, among others. Beach resort favourites include deep sea fishing, sailing, fat-tyre beach bikes, snorkelling, scuba diving, beach volleyball and soccer. More relaxing activities include cooking classes, Spanish lessons, and by night, live shows ranging from karaoke nights to celebrity tribute acts to folk performances.

The food and beverage programme is, according to the person assisting me at the Excellence Club check-in, part of the hotel's overriding 'innovative curation' where, 'every detail of your preferences have been taken into account.' When Excellence Club-only dining options are factored in with the extra Club investment, what greets the diners should match up with expectations of what they may find in a comparable restaurant in a city. Several of the restaurants requiring reservations at night come the closest, though there are surprisingly tasty finds at the more casual venues.

Dommo stands as the pinnacle of the Excellence Club adults-only restaurants, with a culinary approach at dinner that's best described as creative contemporary continental. By day, it offers made-to-order breakfasts in a quiet setting and a sleek cocktail lounge operating in the

afternoons and evenings. Le Petit Plaisir, via its art déco-inspired décor, timeless jazz soundtrack, and beautifully executed fare (simple but on-point steaks, roasts and fish, rich soups, decadent sauces), epitomizes the universal definition of French chic. Steakhouse Brass, meanwhile, carves out a classic New York steakhouse experience, and Insieme Trattoria captures the spirit of Toscana with its menu and surroundings.

Shoji, meanwhile, begins on a foundation of a Japanese teppanyaki (show cooking on a large grilling table) foundation and aesthetics, but has undeniable Caribbean flair running through it thanks to Dominican chefs trained in the art of Japanese technique and a rather abundant use of fresh tropical fruit. Although it is not always the case at large resorts, sushi and sashimi served at Finest makes the grade in terms of



freshness and plating. And as one should expect from any five-star all-inclusive beach resort, fish and seafood offerings are beautifully crafted. That said, Duke's Lobster & Seafood has some of the best bites at the resort on its lunch menu, including fresh ceviche, raw octopus salad, empanadas, and other amped-up appetizers with peppery seasonings and tropical fruit.

Cocktails, meanwhile, run the gamut from fresh in-the-shell coconut water—with or without rum—to frothy pool drinks to sophisticated, intentionally crafted cocktails blending top shelf spirits with fresh ingredients at the main (and very opulent) Golden Bar, club package-only Dommo and the other premium over-18 restaurants. Of course, the fresh brewed Dominican coffee served throughout the resort is a luxury most travellers can agree on when it comes to getting energy required to choose one's vacation destiny every day.

One member of management described the Finest Punta Cana experience best: 'The spacious design and open spaces make our resort an ideal place to enjoy with your partner, family, or friends, providing the expected privacy for a luxury escape,' he says. 'However, the best luxury we offer our guests is the certainty that we take care of every detail for their well-being and comfort with both tangible and intangible amenities, including health and safety protocols that guarantee a peaceful and safe stay.' •



Top: Sea views from the Finest Punta Cana resort. **Above:** Relaxing on the beach. **Left:** Imperial Suite bedroom.