



Cap Cana - Where the Stars Align

We were marveling at a phenomenal outdoor hot tub in the center of a fortress turret, of all places. The tub was in such close proximity to the Caribbean Sea that incoming waves would occasionally crash against the onshore rocks, showering bathers with a delightful sea spray. Suddenly there was a low whoosh, and around the corner came a screaming-yellow helicopter, practically skimming the surface of the cerulean waters. Which VIP guests were arriving at the ethereal Sanctuary Cap Cana? Was it perhaps baseball superstar Alex Rodriguez, with Madonna as escort? Anticipation was intense; we knew this low-key, high-dollar resort hotel located at the easternmost tip of the Dominican Republic would be lit up by a wide range of professional sports stars gathering for the weekend. But would we be in the presence of the Material Girl, to boot? It wasn't hard to see why Boston Red Sox folk hero and Dominican native David "Big Papi" Ortiz chose the Sanctuary Cap Cana as headquarters for his inaugural celebrity golf event. Certainly, the nearby Punta Espada golf course, a Jack Nicklaus signature design, is one of the most magnificent seaside venues in the hemisphere. But golf, even on such a compelling venue as this, is only a smallish piece of the puzzle. Big-time professional athletes, be they of the modern era, or legends from the near past, require a certain level of service and coddling beyond immaculate fairways and chilled towels at the turn. The Sanctuary Cap

Cana delivers like a Mariano Rivera fastball or a Pedro Martinez curve (both in attendance) - simply one of the best in the business.

"It's just a beautiful spot, wonderful for couples," offered Rivera, the legendary Yankee relief pitcher. Recovering from off-season shoulder surgery, the Panamanian couldn't participate in the charity golf event, but still came and brought his family to revel in the weekend's festivities. "It's ridiculously beautiful," added knuckleball specialist Tim Wakefield, currently the longest serving member of the Red Sox, whose tenure dates from 1995. His teammate and host for the weekend was equally effusive. "This place is outstanding," offered Big Papi, understandably proud of his breathtaking homeland. "The hotel is so natural, yet the views are so spectacular."

So is the service. The food, the décor, the little touches, like iced-water pitchers in the lobby infused with mint, or wi-fi throughout the ultra-comfortable sitting areas. Sanctuary Cap Cana is like two hotels in one. The main structure is built in Spanish Colonial style, while the satellite building, called the "Fortaleza," actually resembles a fortress (hence the turret with the hot tub). Stylistically they are different, but both feature shimmering pools, knockout suites, superb eating-and-drinking establishments, happening cocktail spots, and everywhere one turns, aching beautiful views of the aquamarine sea. Words (and even the accompanying photos) can hardly do it justice.

Cap Cana itself, more than 6,100 acres with a full three miles of spectacular beaches, is decidedly a work in progress. Eventually (and if the economy stabilizes) there will be a super-sized marina with room for 1,000 mega-yachts. Country clubs, several more golf courses, elegant boutiques, another handful of hotels and lodges, scores of restaurants, a ready-made village, world-class spas, tennis and swimming facilities, deep-sea fishing, polo grounds, casinos, and thousands of private residences, condos and timeshares will spring from the unbelievably lush landscape. But for the time being, it is Sanctuary Cap Cana and the estimable Punta Espada Golf Course that provide visitors and potential home-buying prospects a tantalizing glimpse of what's to come.



The golf course (which will be joined by another Nicklaus offering called Las Iguanas midway though 2009) is another stunner. Large coral formations provide both visual counterpoints to the azure waters of the sea, and much to a player's delight, the ability to launch tee shots from an elevated platform. There are massive bunkers and waste areas, but equally generous fairways, and the playing corridors meander to and from the surfside on eight different occasions, with the closest intersections at the 2nd and 3rd greens, the marvelously heroic tee shot on the par-3 13th, and the cross-chasm tee shot on the 17th. Stated simply, it's among the most beautiful golf courses in the world.

Speaking of beautiful, a neck-wrenching young actress/model named Lindsay Clubine in attendance for the weekend more than made up for the fact that, though A-Rod was there (and for that matter sluggers Vladimir Guerrero, Andres "Big Cat" Gallaraga, reigning World Series champ Ryan Howard of the Philadelphia Phillies, former Red Sox greats like Luis Tiant and Jim Rice, and NHL icon Bobby Orr, among others), Madonna was not.

"I've been all over the world as the host of the TV travel show 'Get Out,' " offers Ms. Clubine, who assuredly reaches a far wider audience with her other job, as a case-holder on the NBC hit show "Deal or no Deal." (Number 26, for those of you scoring at home.) "This is one of the most amazingly picturesque places I've ever had the pleasure to see." The model's main squeeze is Red Sox pitcher Clay

Buchholz, whose career highlight is undoubtedly throwing a no-hitter in only his second Major League start, in September of 2007, although hanging with Clubine has got to be a close second. "I have never been to the DR before this," states the hard-throwing Buchholz. "But even what Big Papi has told me doesn't really describe things. You've got to see it to believe it."



John Havlicek, like Buchholz, was also on his inaugural visit to the Dominican Republic. "Hondo" summed it up almost as well as his wife, Beth. "One of the things that attracts a name field is the venue," explains the Boston Celtics legend, named one of the Top 50 Players in NBA History. "The better the venue, the better the celebrity turnout. And this is first-class all the way." Adds Beth Havlicek, "We've been traveling to celebrity events like this for 40 years, and I must say that in terms of hotels we've visited, this one is right at the top."

Sanctuary Cap Cana is truly one of the most idyllic retreats imaginable. Check it out for yourself, but don't despair if your fellow hotel guests aren't Golden Glovers, Cy Young Award winners, World Series champs or Hall-of-Famers members. It matters little what kind of mega-wattage personnel is on hand when you arrive, because hard by the coastline in the gorgeous DR, at this little corner of Eden in particular, the hotel itself is the real star.