

LODGING

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF PUNTA CANA

DOMINICAN
REPUBLIC

MELIA HOTELS INTERNATIONAL

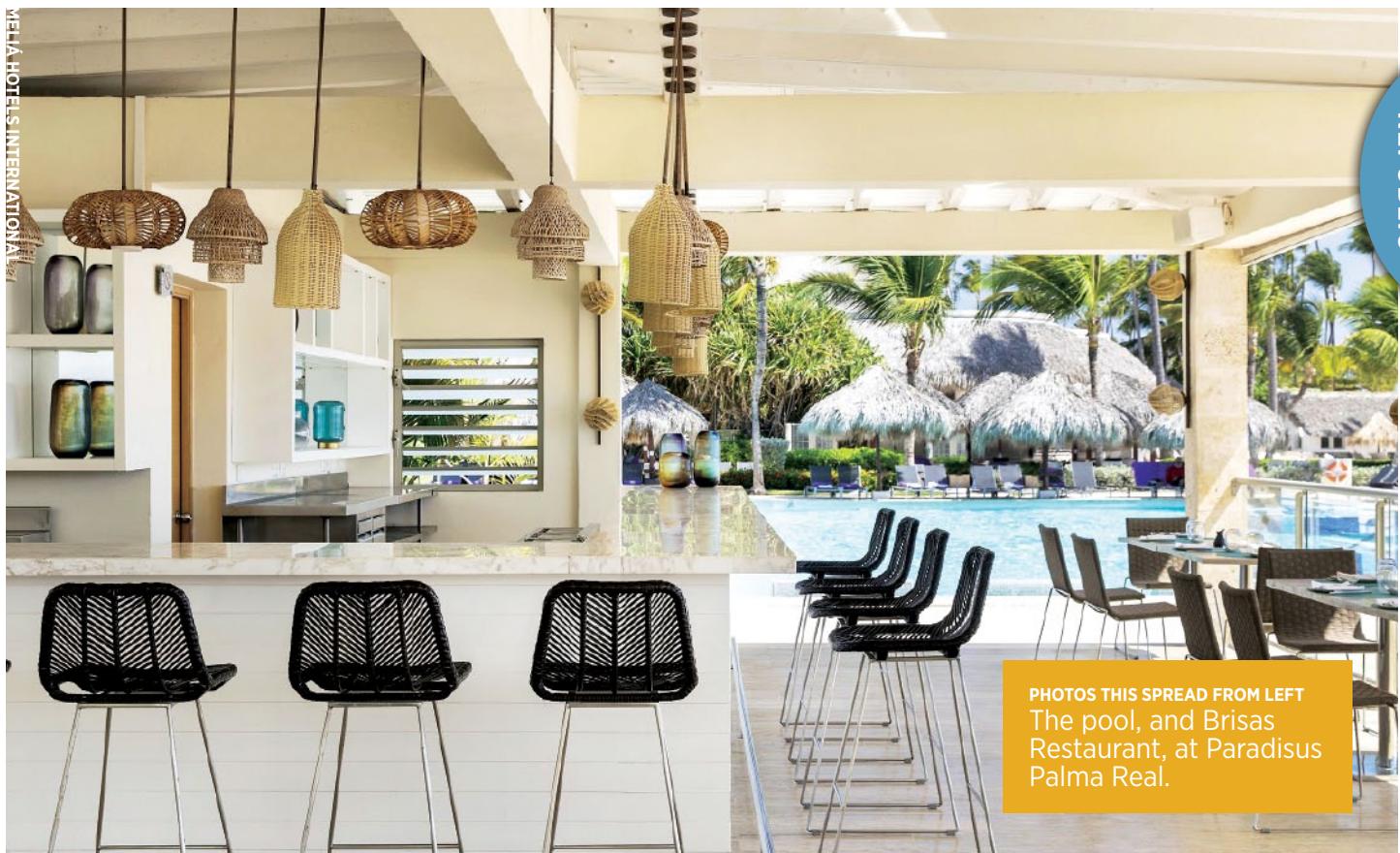


Dominican Republic

WHERE ON EARTH

The Lighter Side of **PUNTA CANA**

by ELYSE GLICKMAN



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT
The pool, and Brisas
Restaurant, at Paradisus
Palma Real.

THERE'S A FASCINATING paradox involved in planning a vacation at a four- or five-star all-inclusive resort. Although a traveller often strives to look his or her beach best prior to the trip, all the effort can go out the window once access to exotic food and decadent cocktails opens up after check-in. But in the Dominican Republic, Spanish hotel chain Meliá Hotels International is breaking new ground with food and beverage programs with a wellness focus that reflects the changing tastes and priorities of travellers.

The adults-only Meliá Punta Cana Beach Resort has been transformed from a "party" hotel to a resort focused on an immersive *Wellbeing 360 Experience*. The wellness all-inclusive concept involves retrofitting guest rooms in the premium The Level area with modern, pared down decor and sustainable operating practices. Self-care focused amenities include an air-purification system, sunrise simulator, yoga mat, weights, day bed, shower with Vitamin C infuser, thermal mattress, complimentary bicycle rental, and a junk-food and liquor-free minibar. Guests opting for the higher-tier Stay Well rooms at the resort's YHI Spa have daily use of its Atabeira Water Emotion, outfitted with a water circuit, a sauna, steam room and vitality pool. Meliá The Level guests will find plenty of satisfying hot-weather friendly dishes at Vietnamese à-la-carte restaurant Muoi, the sophisticated à la carte and buffet

restaurant Quimera, and chill tropical dining area Calathea.

The YHI Spa menu has its treatments broken down into detoxification, calm, and pain relief modalities. The spa layout and decor is a feast for the eyes, and the aromas are heavenly, yet there's no question that the most decadent indulgences at this resort are found on this menu. I opted for the Dominican Cacao Therapy which uses cacao fruits and other edible and non-edible ingredients to hydrate and polish the skin. Being wrapped in foil like a chocolate bar is part of the fun. Other skin-loving "desserts" on offer include the aptly named Coffee with Sugar, Please (body exfoliation and a coffee body wrap, followed by a moringa oil hydration) and Herbal Essential facial, featuring organic ylang-ylang, rose, geranium and night blooming jasmine essential oils.

The wellness program also includes yoga, meditation (don't miss the sound bath if it is available during your stay), bike tours, botanical garden workshops, sustainability talks and culinary classes. The class offered during my visit focused on Hawaiian poke made Dominican with market fresh fruits, vegetables, and sushi-grade tuna or shrimp), with useful information on how to customize and modify the recipe for specific health goals, needs, or food sensitivities.

Paradisus Palma Real Golf & Spa Resort and **Paradisus Grand Cana** (formerly Falcon's Resort by Meliá All Suites Punta Cana), the two five-star resorts completing Meliá Hotels International's triad of revitalized Bávaro Beach all-inclusives, meanwhile, pack »



SERVES 1

Sunset All Year

A LIME, coconut and cinnamon cocktail from Falcon's Resorts by Meliá All Suites

Gold Rum of choice, 45 ml

Coconut Cream
30 ml

Milk 15 ml

Lime Juice 30 ml

Cinnamon Stick,
Coconut Flakes
and **Fresh Mint**
for garnish

- 1 **PLACE** the rum, coconut cream, milk and lime juice into a shaker and then fill it with ice.
- 2 **SHAKE** hard for 12 seconds until all the ingredients are mixed.
- 3 **POUR** into a chilled coupe glass without ice.
- 4 **GARNISH** with coconut flakes, cinnamon stick and fresh mint

in a lot of luxuries as well as spas of their own, along with a surprising abundance of low- and no-guilt menu offerings, including ceviches, gazpachos, substantial vegetarian and vegan dishes, and grilled seafood and fish. While standard food favourites such as burgers, pastas, breads and hearty breakfast items are available, the chilled ceviches, salads and grilled fish are particularly appealing given the locale's heat and humidity along with the many outdoor activities available.

Like Dominican culture, lighter foods and fruity drinks — even at their most simple — are alive with colour, texture and flavour. I found it impressive that the restaurant kitchens at neither resort relied on an excessive amount of salt, spice, or unnecessary seasoning. It's a philosophy that I found worked beautifully at both resorts, especially when finding elegant things to eat that were inherently healthier but did not feel or taste like a compromise. Each resort has its own distinctive personality and aesthetic, which translates to how food and beverages are presented.

Fish and seafood dishes are the star attractions at many of the Meliá properties' restaurants, particularly Paradisus Palma Real's adults-only Flora and beach-facing Santé, and Paradisus Grand Cana's Peruvian-Asian concept Machu (highlights: Tradita Nikkei, Amazon Ceviche, and Shrimp and Octopus Ceviche) and casual outdoor sit-down *cevichería* Mangu. The fresh catches of the day are lightly grilled, baked, chilled, or served sushi/sashimi style. Across the board, salads are flavoured with light fruit- or vinegar and oil-based dressings rather than creamier blends. Flora and Santé put the same attention to detail into several vegetarian dishes, vegan options, and regional recipes with sustainable ingredients.

While there's a family-friendly buffet one can fall into at breakfast at each resort, other alternatives abound. Santé's a la carte morning menu skews lighter, while Malva provides bazaar-style buffet where guests can sample local Dominican culture and flavours throughout breakfast, lunch, and à la carte dinner. As an early riser, I was drawn

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT

Dining at Paradisus Grand Cana; Shrimp Ceviche at Paradisus Palma Real.



MELIÁ HOTELS INTERNATIONAL



to Ginger, the quiet crowd-free bar/lounge area at Paradisus, offering specialty coffees, smoothies and freshly squeezed juices made to order.

In the beach resort milieu where sweet or overpowering pool drinks abound, cocktails served at the 11 bars between the two resorts are made with a refreshingly similar approach. Freshly squeezed juices (passionfruit is one of the ingredients of choice) and botanical garnishes prevail at such outlets as Paradisus' Rum Republic Spice & Sugar Bar, Between Lounge Bar and Paradisus Grand Cana's Nest and Mama & Juana (named for the Dominican Republic's home-grown spirit).

Both all-inclusives have pan-Asian/sushi and Latin American concept outlets. If guests gravitate towards one splurge meal, the steakhouses — Mina at Paradisus and Karnica at Falcon's — do not disappoint, between perfectly cooked steaks, savoury side dish classics with a Caribbean twist, and desserts... along with fish and vegetarian options catering to lighter tastes. The Winery at Paradisus ups the sophistication with tasting sessions accompanied with charcuterie plates and led by astute sommeliers.

All-inclusive resorts in the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and other warm weather locales abound. However, it's nice to know that companies like Meliá are setting a trend with food and beverage programs that send an important message: Although you can have it all, you have the freedom to enjoy only what you need to feel satisfied and light hearted on your next vacation. 

Paradisus Palma Real Golf & Spa Resort
www.melia.com

Paradisus Grand Cana (formerly Falcon's
 Resort by Meliá All Suites Punta Cana)
www.melia.com

Meliá Punta Cana Beach Resort
www.melia.com

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SERVES 1
Compás

A MOCKTAIL made with passionfruit and cinnamon.

Passionfruit Juice
 45 ml

Cinnamon Syrup
 (recipe below) 15 ml

Strawberry Syrup
 (recipe below) 15 ml

Tonic Water to fill
 the glass

Cinnamon Stick
 and **Mint Leaves**
 for garnish

- 1 **PLACE** the passionfruit juice, cinnamon syrup and strawberry syrup ingredients into a shaker and then fill it with ice.
- 2 **SHAKE** hard for 12 seconds until all the ingredients are mixed.
- 3 **POUR** into a chilled rocks glass with ice. Top up the glass with tonic water.
- 4 **GARNISH** with the cinnamon stick and mint leaves.

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

Cinnamon Syrup

Water 1 cup

Sugar 1 cup

Cinnamon Sticks 4

- 1 **BRING** the cinnamon sticks, water and sugar to a boil, stirring occasionally until the syrup is thickened and reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ in volume.

MAKES ABOUT 1 1/2 CUPS

Strawberry Syrup

Strawberries
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup,
 chopped

Water 1 cup

Sugar 1 cup

- 1 **COMBINE** the strawberries, water and sugar in a medium pan and bring to a boil.
- 2 **LOWER** the heat and simmer until the strawberries are soft, and the syrup is thickened and reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ in volume.