

## Mint Condition

### Dominican-Based Management Group Takes Personal Approach With Boutique Hotels

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By Kerry Medina

Mint Hotels & Residences is taking a different approach to lodging in the Dominican Republic. In a country long known among global travelers for its many all-inclusive resorts, this Santo Domingo-based hospitality management group is targeting experiential travelers seeking—not mass market dining and live shows nightly—but a personalized trip with more intimate accommodations and immersive, off-property explorations throughout their stay.

Today, the five hotels in Mint's portfolio vary in room count from 18 to 32 keys and are located throughout the country. The hotels--the Bannister

Hotel & Yacht Club in Samaná; Casa Bonita Tropical Lodge in Barahona; Punta Rucia Lodge in Punta Rucia; El Portillo Residences in Las Terrenas in Samaná; and Los

Altos Residences in Casa de Campo—are each owned by a different, local family. Miguelina Burton, partner and vice president of marketing at Mint, is careful to point out that none of the properties have international investors and most of the families who own them are not hoteliers.



**The Punta Rucia Lodge in Punta Rucia.**

Burton also describes Mint as a consumer-facing brand and explains that owners view Mint as a means to elevate the exposure and the bookings that their properties receive. "It's a challenge for us to manage independent properties in the Dominican Republic because the concept is so different here and the locations aren't necessarily in the same areas as the larger resorts," she said. "But it's also an opportunity to sell the entire country, its natural wonders, historic sites and all of the cultural experiences it has to offer."

While these hotels are all unique, they do share some similar characteristics. They have fewer than 50 rooms, which is the cap for Mint properties. Their locations and architecture are distinct and they are integrated into their local communities. The hotels don't use plastic straws and limit their use of other plastics.

Some also practice organic agriculture, selling some products and using some on-property. "We look for very niche hotels that are truly unique and have a strong sense of place," said Burton.

Mint considers the structural and design attributes of a property as well as more granular features like its soft goods and website. The hotels' general managers are employed and trained by the management group, which also ensures distribution for the properties across an array of channels that include OTAs and the retail travel community in addition to major tour operators, the GDS and Mint's own website.

Airbnb is also leveraged as a distribution channel for the hotels as Burton doesn't view the alternative accommodations provider as competition, but rather as another selling tool. "We've been using Airbnb as



a distribution channel for about four years now and we believe it's good to have them as another available channel because we want to work with everyone that's selling hotels," she said.

The hotels' owners can also opt to affiliate with a soft brand as is the case with Casa Bonia, which is a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH). Burton noted that Mint "will always point out to the owners that a flag can generate additional awareness for the property and comes with a sales force that can complement our own."

Another service that Mint offers to hotel guests and owners is Mint Experiences, which effectively serves as an in-house destination management company that allows guests to combine two or more Mint hotels into a single trip. The service included transfers that can take the form of helicopter or seaplane travel, and organizes private airport transportation and customs clearance to and from any of the country's major airports, in addition to local cultural and nature excursions in each hotel's destination.

For example, Punta Rucia Lodge is 20 minutes from the coral island Cayo Arena where guests can go scuba diving and El Portillo Residences is 30-minutes away from Salto del Limon National Park where guests can hike and horseback ride to waterfalls. Other activities such as spa treatments and yoga, kite surfing or dinner at a local high-end restaurant helmed by a European chef are all fair game.

"Travelers today are not just looking for luxury hotel rooms," Burton noted. "They want to invest their money in experiences like a riverside spa treatment or a hammock in the middle of nowhere where they can sip a glass of wine under the night stars."

For the hotels' owners, Burton explained that Mint Experiences is another reason they contract with the management company. She said, "we develop the content for each property and sell the experience and they give owners another revenue stream."

Guests can choose from five pre-designed experiences or customize their own. As the itineraries are both hyper-local and effectively packaged travel, the product has helped increase business from U.S.-based travel agents who earn a standard 20 percent on all bookings.

Hospitality Management Solutions (HMS) is the parent company behind Mint Hotels & Residences. Founded in 2010 with just two employees, the company continues to focus on luxury condominium management nearly a decade in, albeit with 30 employees in the Dominican Republic and another 50 in Panama. Mint was developed as a shared vision between Burton, who has a background in hotel sales and marketing as well as a post-graduate degree in ecotourism, and HMS President Abelardo Melgen Acra, whose expertise is real estate.

Now, their vision has evolved to eventually grow their hotel management business beyond the Dominican Republic where family offices and investors are increasingly looking to develop small and medium-sized projects that don't necessarily have close airport proximity.

"We're in a good place to partner with them," said Burton. "There aren't a lot of hotel management companies based in the Dominican Republic and I believe we're the only Dominican brand with this boutique hotel concept."