

Tried & Tested

Travel Weekly heads to the Caribbean to test three refurbished resorts at Spanish-owned all-inclusive brands

Luxury Bahia Principe
Ambar, Dominican Republic



Riu Palace Tropical Bay
Hotel, Jamaica



Grand Palladium Costa
Mujeres, Mexico



The Luxury Bahia Principe Ambar boasts 144 new swim-up suites

Luxury Bahia Principe Ambar, Dominican Republic Tested by: Rachel Roberts

The Piñero family knew they were taking a risk when they closed the doors of the Luxury Bahia Principe Ambar resort in the Dominican Republic for six months last year, to carry out extensive renovations.

It's something Pablo, founder of the Bahia Principe brand and late father of the family which now runs the business, always vetoed because of the effect on repeat bookings. However, the gamble – by sisters Encarna, Isabel and Lydia, board directors in the Grupo Piñero portfolio – has certainly paid off.

The property's \$26 million refurbishment dovetails with a rebrand of the Bahia Principe portfolio. Its hotels and resorts are now segmented into collections called Treasure, adult-only Escape, and Family and Friends.

As part of the Escape brand, the Luxury Bahia Principe Ambar – part of the seven-resort Bahia Principe complex – is a standout example of a five-star all-inclusive.

SWIM-UP SUITES

Located in Punta Cana, the complex overlooks the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean and offers guests private use of the impeccably maintained Bávaro beach.

Luxury Bahia Principe Ambar has 528 rooms housed in chic three-floor buildings in grounds abundantly planted with palm trees and rainbow-bright flowers.

We experienced one of the resort's most marketable features: a stay in one of 144 brand-new swim-up terraced suites. Set on the ground floor of each building, the swim-up pools flow into the same narrow waterway, a clever set-up that means clients can have privacy or – as we did – the opportunity to get to know their neighbours with a leisurely swim-by chat (a serious luxury when temperatures soar).

Beyond the regular selling points, the concierge service is worth highlighting to potential clients. A team of on-call butlers cater to guests' every whim – from excursions to complimentary laundry and a 'room scent' menu.

There's also a handy app, offering up-to-date information on the day's activities, from foam pool parties to silent discos, Spanish lessons to yoga classes. It can also make table reservations at one of the five restaurants around the resort, with buffet and à la carte

choices. We rated the intimate Limbo restaurant for its high-end gourmet menu and inventive cocktail list.

Unlike comparable resorts, the Luxury Bahia Principe Ambar seems to have space to spare; real thought has gone into the layout and there are plenty of private little spots to be found away from other guests. The large swimming pool (with swim-up bar, obviously) is surrounded by enticing loungers for sun-worshippers, or there's a chill-out zone for those who prefer to relax on a Bali-style bed. The spa offers a full range of treatments plus a hydrotherapy circuit.

OUT AND ABOUT

Many clients will happily stay in-resort for their entire holiday, but we ventured out and were enchanted by the country's geographical diversity. The rural landscape features palm tree-covered mountains, coffee and cacao plantations, and colonial architecture, not forgetting those made-in-heaven white beaches.

And as part of an ongoing commitment to social and environmental responsibility, Bahia spearheads a year-round island clean-up initiative and co-funds local school-building projects – which should keep eco-aware clients happy too. ➤



MUST-DO EXCURSIONS

Safari Chocolate Adventure:

This half-day tour packs in highlights including a visit to El Caño, a tobacco, cacao and coconut eco-plantation, where we sampled cigars and mamajuana, a drink made by soaking tree bark and spices in rum, wine and honey. We also looked around a traditional home while the owner serenaded us with island music on his guitar (\$47). country-adventure.com

Day trip to Samana:

Get a new view of the Dominican Republic on a journey across the country, followed by a short speedboat ride to the charming island of Samana, where a horse ride up to the spectacular waterfall at El Limón and typical Dominican-style lunch await.

BOOK IT

Prices for a Junior Suite Deluxe Swim Up at Bahia Principe Ambar start at £197 per person per night, based on an all-inclusive stay in August. bahia-principe.com

The Riu Palace Tropical Bay Hotel was refurbished last year



BOOK IT

A Junior Suite starts at £118 per person per night in low season, rising to £172 at peak times. Suites start at £164 or £225 respectively. riu.com

JAMAICA HIGHLIGHTS

Rick's Cafe: Daredevils may cliff-jump into the water here to get their kicks but everyone simply comes to soak up the glorious sunsets.

YS Falls: Head south to see this spectacular waterfall in its lush jungle surroundings. Those after a challenge can climb or zipline across it.

Bob Marley: Visit the place where reggae began, aka the small town of Nine Miles, where Bob Marley was born and where he is now buried.

Riu Palace Tropical Bay Hotel, Jamaica

Tested by: Katie McGonagle

The sun was blazing, the palm fronds swishing gently in the breeze, and the waves lapping at the shore of Jamaica's Bloody Bay, just moments from the spectacular Seven Mile Beach. But there was no lying back on a sun lounger just yet – the Beach Olympics were about to begin.

Lining up against an American family and a young couple from Italy, I joined a team of Brits to represent the UK in this impromptu international event. Admittedly, our sport of choice happened to

be throwing bean bags into a goal a mere 15 feet away – not quite worthy of the real Olympics but exertion enough for a sunny day.

I lined up, took aim and – missed (more than once), but finally managed to redeem myself on the last throw, albeit too late to secure a podium place for the Brits.

Yet with a few cheers from our fellow guests and the promise of a cocktail to come, our lack of success didn't seem to matter too much.

NEW LOOK

Riu Palace Tropical Bay Hotel in Negril, which was the brand's first foray into Jamaica when it opened in 2001, underwent an extensive refurbishment last year, reopening with a lighter, more modern feel.

Its 452 rooms have been transformed with the addition of light wood fittings accented with

splashes of turquoise, and walk-in showers instead of bathtubs. The lobby has also been upgraded, with bigger windows making it feel inviting rather than purely functional, and there's now 24-hour service in the lobby bar, in addition to any-time room service.

Restaurants range from indoor-outdoor buffet Negril and fusion restaurant Krystal – where the flavour combinations were a little hit-and-miss – to the much more reliable Italian restaurant Rimini, and Hakuchi, which serves excellent Japanese dishes. The decor has been upgraded across the speciality restaurants, which are part of the all-inclusive package with no reservations necessary. A new coffee and ice cream bar, Capuchino, has also been added.

As with most all-inclusive resorts, life revolves around the pool or, in

this case, three of them: a chill-out pool featuring in-water recliners; another for volleyball and other activities; and one with a swim-up bar and music. There's also a kids' pool and new RiuLand kids' club.

LOCAL LIFE

Several companies offer activities around the island, with the full-day Rick's Cafe excursion being one of the most popular options.

Step outside the hotel and Jamaican life comes to the fore. Visitors travelling through the nearby parishes will see roadside food carts selling dwarf coconuts and sliced fruit from under corrugated iron roofs, swanky cars alongside crumbling brick walls, single-storey schools cheek by jowl with grand churches and courthouses, and cafes that double up as barber's shops and hubs for local gossip.

Grand Palladium Costa Mujeres, Mexico

Tested by: Ben Ireland

On the Atlantic coast of northeast Mexico, within reach of the world's second-biggest barrier reef, the latest addition to Palladium's all-inclusive portfolio is neatly tucked away from sight, despite being just 20 minutes from Cancun.

The 670-room Grand Palladium Costa Mujeres is part of a huge complex that is also home to the adult-only TRS Coral and the latest Rafa Nadal Tennis Centre.

Grand Palladium boasts 19 bars and four swimming pools (some with swim-up bars), eight à la carte restaurants and an on-site 'village' with amphitheatre, cabaret (at extra cost), shopping and wedding chapel within its piazza. The impressive Zentropia Spa also offers a chance for guests to relax in its infinity pool, whirlpool, saunas, steam and ice rooms.

The sheer size of the complex, linked together via a network of man-made canals with boats to ferry guests back and forth, means you could spend a week at

Grand Palladium Costa Mujeres without getting bored. Yet the resort is also within easy reach of Cancun and the popular islands of Isla Mujeres and Isla Contoy, a gateway to the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef and a protected area of natural beauty. Excursions are bookable from the hotel, with a day trip to both islands priced from \$151 including transfers and snorkelling.

RESORT ROUND-UP

Rooms at Grand Palladium are spread across six buildings, with 552 Junior Suites, eight swim-up Junior Suites, 24 Loft Suites and six Ambassador Suites, two of which are swim-up. One of the buildings is exclusively for families with its own separate buffet restaurant The Nest (for breakfast and lunch) and separate pool.

The Family Selection, a 'hotel within a hotel', is split into 46 Junior Suites, 30 Loft Suites and four Ambassador Suites, with a kids' club and access to Xbox games consoles and butler service. Children also get a welcome kit with goodies such as baseball caps and toys.

The hotel has access to the white sands of Costa Mujeres, a nice alternative to poolside lounging.

Among Grand Palladium's sandstone architecture and minimalist setting are unique touches such as a herb garden and Onions sculpture in the hotel entrance. **TW**

SERVE AN ACE

Perhaps the most interesting selling point of Grand Palladium Costa Mujeres is its Rafa Nadal Tennis Centre. Opened in February by the now 18-time grand slam winner, guests can have lessons where they're taught using the same techniques as Nadal. The centre has eight clay courts, five outdoor and three indoor, as well as a padel tennis court and seven-a-side football pitch for those keener on a kickabout. Tennis classes can be as intensive as guests want, spread over three to six days, with options including premium programme, drills, and Total Tennis, as well as classes for doubles, kids and juniors. The Total Tennis programme costs \$300 for three days or \$600 for six days.



Junior Suite Swim Up

BOOK IT

A Junior Suite Swim Up at Grand Palladium Costa Mujeres Resort & Spa leads in at £231 per room per night, based on two adults sharing on an all-inclusive basis. A Family Selection Junior Suite starts at £266 per room per night, based on two adults and two children sharing. palladiumhotelgroup.com

