

# MACO

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## the secret's out

SIX YEARS ON, AN ECO-RESORT IN DOMINICA FLOURISHES ON A CLIFF AT A BAY WHOSE NAME IS SECRET

IT IS VERY RARE TO FIND SO MANY NATURAL TREASURES  
 IN ONE PLACE: LOFTY TREES, PICTURESQUE RIVER,  
 DRAMATIC CLIFFS, HUGE ROCKS, WHITE-SAND BEACH,  
 CORAL REEFS, SEA CLIFF CAVE, AND, ABOVE ALL,  
 VIEWS OF THE TURQUOISE SEA AND THE GREEN MOUNTAINS BEHIND

THE LOCATION CHOSEN FOR THE HOUSE WAS EXCEPTIONALLY BEAUTIFUL—ON A CLIFF OVERLOOKING THE CARIBBEAN SEA, ON DOMINICA'S WEST COAST COVERED WITH PRISTINE TROPICAL FOREST BETWEEN TWO PICTURESQUE SANDY BEACHES.

The blueprints for the villa were a wedding gift from an acclaimed Latin American architect to his daughter Sandra and her husband, Dominican-born entrepreneur Gregor Nassief.

However, when the couple surveyed land for the villa, they faced an unexpected dilemma. "It turned out that the house was too big for us and construction would be too destructive for the land," says Gregor. "So we decided to scale it down and make a few buildings instead of one—and that's when the idea of a luxury eco-resort came about."

For Gregor, this corner of Dominica and especially the Secret Beach was an important place full of fond memories. "I remember coming here when I was a child, climbing the cliffs, and I didn't want to leave." Over the years, he acquired four acres of pristine environment which he wanted to preserve. "From the very beginning, Sandra and I decided that whatever we did, this unspoiled nature has to be left unaffected."

In 2011, the first villa called Zabuco was constructed. Soon after, Derek Galon and I came to photograph it for the grand opening. I vividly remember how deeply moved I was, not only by striking organic architecture, but also by the exquisite beauty of the land itself. It is very rare to find so many natural treasures in one place: lofty trees, picturesque river, dramatic cliffs, huge rocks, white-sand beach, coral reefs, sea cliff cave, and, above all, views of the turquoise sea and the green mountains behind.

Dominica has more remaining rainforest than any other Lesser Antillean island. The steepness of terrain

was a natural deterrent, preventing big development. Flora around Secret Bay is a verdant mixture of sun-loving dry scrub woodland and moisture-loving plants along the river. Some deciduous shrubs produce very showy flowers in the dry season—a special treat for green iguanas. The numbers of birds and insects are equally impressive, including over 50 species of butterflies, some endemic to the island. Waters around Secret Bay are rich in marine life and abundant in healthy coral reefs. To be there and see this extraordinary beauty is pure bliss and a life-changing experience.

After Zabuco, five new villas were added, also without use of heavy equipment. Only a few trees, and only where really necessary, were cut down. All locations for villas were chosen very carefully to integrate them with the existing terrain. Each villa has its own way of fitting into the landscape, as if it were always there. "From the boat you can hardly see there is a resort there, and that's what we wanted—to put environment first," says Gregor.



PREVIOUS PAGE Computer rendering shows the future expansion of Secret Bay  
 ABOVE Like living in tree house, at Secret Bay  
 FAR LEFT Private deck for Zabuco villa guests  
 LEFT Secret Beach seen from the Zabuco villa



“WE WANTED TO CREATE A FEELING OF BEING INSIDE BUT ALSO OUTSIDE AT THE SAME TIME,” GREGOR COMMENTS. “SO THE VILLAS SEEM TO BE AN EXTENSION OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT”

The resort’s architecture plays its part in welcoming the outside in by the open-plan concept with floor-to-ceiling windows, folding doors and numerous decks. “We wanted to create a feeling of being inside but also outside at the same time,” Gregor comments. “So the villas seem to be an extension of the natural environment.”

Being there you are participating in Nature’s spectacles, watching the sea changing colours as shadows lengthen, raindrops on leaves reflecting the sky, pelicans plunging into the sea. You are an integral part of Nature.

Secret Bay with its six villas received raving reviews and quickly became a fine destination, but Gregor and Sandra had a vision for further expansion.

Just recently another two luxury villas called Ylang Ylang were added, each featuring the same elegant lines of architecture and expertly detailed spaces. Villas stand like mighty trees on a massive concrete stilt. Liberated from the ground, they are elevated above the forest floor like hideaway bolt-hole tree-houses.

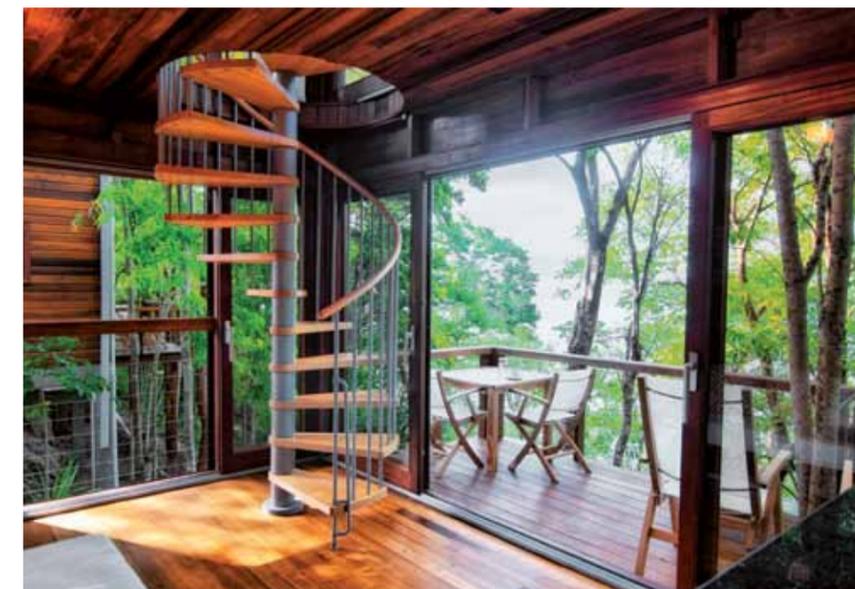
We came to see and photograph the new villas and we were surprised that, despite two more units, Secret Bay feels just as tranquil and private as in its beginning years. When you are in the new Ylang Ylang villa, you feel as if it is the only one around, with the same strong connection between exterior and interior.

Interiors are designed to instill calm. “Because architecture so strongly emphasises the link with tropical exuberant nature, interior decor is rather minimalist,” remarks Sandra. Most of the furniture is hand-crafted from local red cedar. In fact, all wood used for the construction came from sustainable sources. “We were involved with every aspect of construction: how this cement mix will look after hardening, where to set garden paths, choosing all appliances and home decor in every detail,” says Sandra. “We did it to make sure Secret Bay looks exactly like we envisioned it.”

LEFT Lower level of Ylang Ylang villa exposes its single tree-like column, holding the whole building in its massive branches

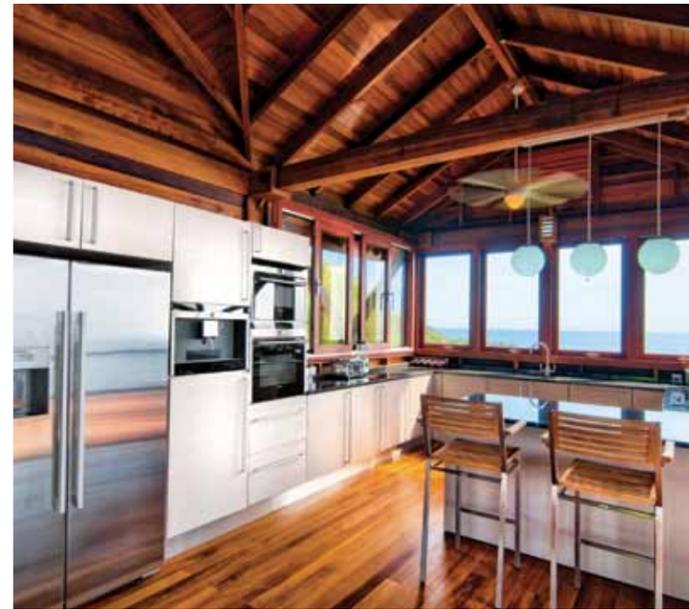
BELOW All villas are furnished with modern simplicity

BOTTOM Interior of a bungalow is surprisingly spacious, thanks to its clever design





ABOVE Bungalow bedroom



ABOVE RIGHT Villas are equipped with high-end Siemens appliances

RIGHT Modern and funky bathtub with oversized rain-shower head looks almost surreal in hardwood-finished space

The architect behind this adventurous, brave but lucid design is Fruto Vivas. His career took off over 60 years ago after he worked with the legendary pioneer of modern architecture Oscar Niemeyer. They were collaborating on the design of the Museum of Modern Art in Caracas. Though deeply rooted in modernism, Vivas's architectural style utilises ecology. His bi-climatic buildings are designed to be in harmony with natural surroundings and a local climate.

Prior to developing Secret Bay, Gregor and Sandra had no experience in hotelier business. Perhaps that explains their unconventional approach to planning: there is no big restaurant, no front desk and no shared swimming pool. "We wanted for the guests to enjoy their own privacy, not having the space shared by anyone else," Gregor says. "Most guests have meals at their own verandas; they have yoga and massage by their own pool; it's a very personalised experience."

Over the years, this luxurious eco-resort received many prestigious awards and accolades, including the World's Best Boutique Hotel 2016 by Boutique Hotel Awards. The recognition gives Secret Bay confidence to go even further. The resort is to expand through a residency programme: 42 new tree-house style villas will span across a 32-acre setting. There will be a restaurant floating over the river, a tree-house spa, an exercise centre with lap pool, an art barn—and a funicular tram providing easier access over hilly terrain. "Just as we took a very different approach for building Secret Bay, we want to continue with new development," says Gregor. "We want this project to be as no other, with its focus on self-sustainability and natural environment residences made for people who prefer to make eco-conscious choices and who appreciate privacy."

It is no coincidence that this sustainable project was born on the island of Dominica, known as the "Nature Island," where much of the land is protected under national parks and many individuals actively pursue living in harmony with nature. In recent years, such unspoiled destinations are the preferred choice of a growing number of environmentally aware tourists. They seek greener hotels and restaurants and want to leave only a light footprint of their visit.

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RIGHT Meals can be served in privacy of your villa, or on many decks, including this ocean deck

BELOW Zabuco III villa, with its elevating stilts clearly visible

BELOW CENTRE Zabuco deck at sunset

BELOW RIGHT Gregor and Sandra on terrace of Ylang Ylang villa

Responsible eco-tourists favour not only pristine environments but also search for an authentic engagement benefiting local communities. According to the World Tourism Organization, more than three million tourists cross international borders every day. The tourism industry has a huge economic impact on improving millions of lives, stimulating sustainable development worldwide. To further promote tourism as catalyst for positive change, the United Nations designated 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Many of us choose destinations where we can have a deeper, more meaningful experience and also make a positive difference.

Who would have thought that what was meant to be a small family affair would grow to such a daring enterprise? "We've never felt the Secret Bay is a finished project, but an ever-evolving process," says Sandra. Gregor adds, "And we remain very passionate about it." M



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