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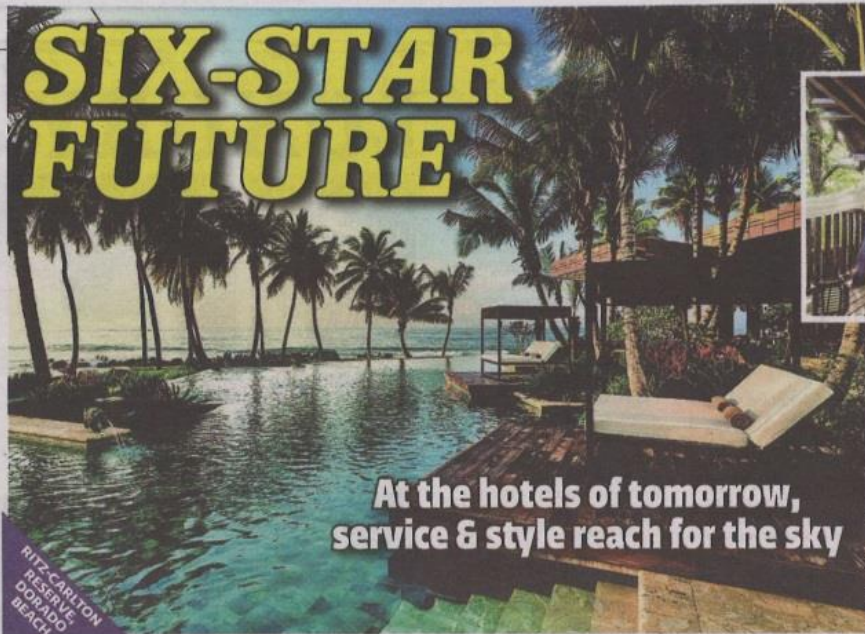
By MICHAEL GROSS

IT'S Saturday at Dorado Beach, a year-old resort in the Ritz-Carlton Reserve collection (ritzcarlton.com). The night before, the 114-room hotel on Puerto Rico's northern coast was at 98 percent capacity. But at its Mi Casa restaurant, headed up by star chef José Andrés, breakfast is served on a deck with an Atlantic view, where skittering lizards and yellow-eyed blackbirds outnumber visible guests by about 8 to 1.

After huevos cubanos, a recipe from the chef's mother, and a soy latte made exactly as I'd requested in an e-mail from New York, I return to my beachfront room, where a bicycle is waiting. Leaning on its handlebars is a typed note from my *embajador*, which means ambassador, but at Dorado it refers to butlers. Fernando, there to wait on me, apologizes for the fact that the hamburger I begged for on arrival came late. There is also a handwritten missive from my housekeeper, introducing herself.

Just another morning in the pampering new world of branded ultra-luxury hotels.

They have many names. They are called six- and seven-star, uber-luxury and ultra-luxury. Those star designations don't really exist, of course, but never mind — the hotels do. What these properties



share is the desire to achieve the very best at serving the needs of the .01 percent — and those who aspire to travel like them.

Granted, the concept of a hyper-luxe hotel isn't new: There have always been small, exclusive properties like Cayo Espanto, a private-island resort in Belize, and

The Point in the Adirondacks. Now, though, major chains are getting in on the action. It's a big bet by big money on the future wants of even bigger international big money.

An ultra-luxury room will set you back anywhere from \$2,100 a night for a villa at the LVMH group's new Cheval Blanc Rand-

heli in the Maldives (chevalblanc.com); it's \$35,952 nightly for the Royal two-bedroom suite at Jumeirah's Burj Al Arab (jumeirah.com). My room at Dorado Beach — more a suite, really, with a heated plunge pool, indoor and outdoor showers and seating areas — runs \$2,099 a night in March.

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The daddy of all six-star hotels is Dubai's sail-shaped Burj Al Arab, which opened 15 years ago, and actually calls itself a seven-star property. Managed by the local firm Jumeirah, the Burj is the United Arab Emirate's version of the Eiffel Tower — a landmark known around the world, despite its relatively modest 202 double-height suites (served by 1,700 employees, mind you). "Dubai was a statement to the world, something extraordinary to draw you here," says Nicholas Clayton, CEO of Jumeirah, which has recently opened a second ultra-luxe property, the 35-villa Dhevanafushi in the Maldives, where many rooms have their own private beaches and butlers. "We'd like to do something more grand — one day we might."

The next entrant into the six-star-

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plus race has been running for a decade. In 2004, Horst Schulze, former chairman of Ritz-Carlton, announced that he was creating Capella, a chain of high-end hotels now found in Austria, Ireland, Mexico and Washington, DC (capellahotels.com). Though he disdained the six-star sobriquet, he meant to launch with a bang, with rooms generally in the \$2,000-per-night range.

So did his former firm, Ritz-Carlton, which revealed its plans to develop the over-the-top group of hotels it calls Reserve in 2005. The first development was supposed to be Molasses Reef in Turks and Caicos, a hotel resort community with villas and marina townhouses.

Then, money got funny. In the storm of the recession, Molasses Reef — which was set to be financed by Lehman Brothers — failed to open after the investment bank's collapse, and the Reserve brand stalled until the 2010 debut of Phulay Bay, on the island of Krabi, in Thailand. In 2008 and 2009, Schulze opened four Capella hotels in Singapore, Mexico and Dusseldorf, but 14 others, all under construction,

LUXURY'S NEW

Cheval Blanc Randhell



CHEVAL BLANC
MALDIVES

“stopped,” he says. “Some were 80 percent complete.”

With occupancy down, the hotel business went on, but development came to a halt, as did sales of homes tied to hotel properties. Schulze says he remained committed to his concept

because demand for existing ultra-luxury rooms actually rose at the same time that new development stalled. He noted that Russians were still traveling “and it was clear the Chinese and Indians would start. That’s why today there’s a crazy boom.”

Industry analysts agree. Milton Pedrazza, founder/CEO of the Luxury Institute, says this “growing army that travels globally” was left unaffected by the recession. “They own stock and real estate and bought more at bargain prices.

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STANDARD



CAPPELLA, WASHINGTON, DC



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They profited. So there is a market ... and demand." Indeed, some hotel operators are convinced the recession helped them. Clayton Ruebensaal, vice president of global marketing at Ritz-Carlton, says opening a new hotel can take eight years, which is why Reserve has only launched two — Phulay Bay and Dorado Beach — so far. Despite the Molasses Reef hiccup, "the pace of development has been normal," Ruebensaal says. "Finding gems is not a

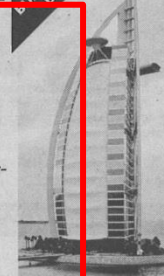
fast pursuit." In the pipeline are Reserve hotels in Ubud, Bali (opening later this year), Tamuda Bay in Morocco, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, and Pearl Island, Panama. Reserve defines its ideal property as "an exotic sanctuary," Ruebensaal says. "The affluent traveler needed cultivated, far-flung, culturally immersive places that are private and very exclusive." By adding heightened, individualized service that surpasses standards Ritz-Carlton already embod-

ies, the brand believes it can create an emotional bond with guests and keep them coming back for more. "Service," he says, "is the driver of the experience." Today, with the recession in the rear view and the global wealthy seemingly unassailable, at least four chains have announced plans to go ultra-luxe. "It's a great time for the introduction of these brands," says Bjorn Hanson, dean of the Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at NYU. "What is a hotel room? A bed, a door, a bath, a TV? How do we package that so someone will pay more?"

Along with conventional hotel groups, luxury product manufacturers also are

getting in on the game. So, besides Reserve and Capella, there is Baccarat, the latest creation of Barry Sternlicht, founder of Starwood Hotels (baccarathotels.com). In July 2005, his Starwood Capital Group acquired the luxury group that owned the 250-year-old French crystal company, Louis XIV, who commissioned Baccarat, would no doubt approve of the company's first venture, opening later this year: a boutique hotel (topped with condos) across from New

BURJ AL ARAB, DUBAI



Courtesy of Burj Al Arab Jumeirah

sive and contemporary ... with distinct residential features," says Olivier Lefebvre, its head of hotel activities. Certainly, intimacy, exclusivity and authenticity define Dorado Beach. A tasting menu at Mi Casa,

York's Museum of Modern Art. More Baccarats are planned in Morocco and Dubai.

Then, there is Cheval Blanc, owned by the LVMH luxury conglomerate. The group began with a 36-room ski-in, ski-out hotel Maison in Courcheval.

Next up was the Randehli, which opened in the Maldives in November. They also recently purchased the Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France in St. Barts. LVMH intends to create a collection as fashionable as its fashion lines: "intimate, exclu-

for instance, is fashionably authentic, beginning with a cone of pastry filled with papaya marmalade and Spanish sheeps cheese topped with walnut dust; followed by Iberian ham with American sturgeon caviar; local shrimp with black garlic, poblano and chile; and spiny lobster with sofrito. Dessert is rice cooked in coconut.

The next day I indulge in a hammock massage in one of the 5-acre spa's two treehouses, followed by a snorkel with Jean-Michael Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment. Throughout my Dorado stay, butlers, maids, servers, guest relations personnel and bearers of chilled coconuts and guava ice pops are ever-present without being intrusive.

Just as they should be, explains Graem Benn, a Ritz-Carlton vice-president. Every visit to a Reserve property has to be "transformative, exclusive, immersive, extraordinary, intimate, enlightening, magical, and experience that can't be replicated."

Michael Gross' latest book "House of Outrageous Fortune" is out today.

