



Golfweek regularly profiles courses that are on Golfweek's Best lists or are a candidate for inclusion.

WATER | WATER everywhere

AT THE SEASIDE PLAYA GRANDE, REES JONES CRAFTS A DOMINICAN DANDY

By Bradley S. Klein // Rio San Juan, Dominican Republic

On the 14th tee of the newly redesigned Playa Grande Club, architect Rees Jones backed off of his drive to survey the scene. The 14th is a short par 5 that runs north, turning right around bunkers before moving downhill to a green set diagonally on the shoreline. Jones turned to his guests, paused, then said, "You can see the

ocean from every hole."

An architect can go a long time, even an entire career, without getting a site like this - with 2.7 miles of frontage on the Atlantic Ocean. It's not just the ocean views that make golf here along the northeast coast of the Dominican Republic so thrilling. Jones took an underperforming golf course that his dad, Robert

Trent Jones Sr., designed two decades ago and turned it into a stunning, bold adventure along the bluffs that manages to be compelling and fun without overloading the senses.

At too many Caribbean settings the course gets a window on the water or perhaps a string of holes along a linear coast. Here, the coastline jags in and »

The waves crash alongside the 16th hole.

out, creating pockets, inlets and outcrop headlands that are ideal for strategic golf. Ten holes sit on or along the water. They make for a powerful round.

Rees Jones and his longtime design associate, Bryce Swanson, kept about half of the original routing. They reversed the rest, eliminated an awkward reverse-camber uphill par 4 and brought golf along the shoreline, while building in bailout options to avoid heroic carries.

The new Playa Grande bears scant resemblance to its predecessor, thanks to enlarged greens averaging 6,800 square feet and classically inspired bunkering that protrudes diagonally across lines of play. Borrowing a stylistic page from the early work of Jones Sr., they broke up the bunker faces into tooth-edged forms.

Credit for the vision here also must go to Dolphin Capital Investors, the firm that bought the place in 2007 and transformed the 2,170-acre property. Dolphin Capital arranged an operating agreement with the ultra-upscale resort brand Aman, which in turn created a boutique inn, spa and recreational idyll called Amanera, the 29th such property in its global portfolio. Avatars of the hotel brand, self-styled Aman Junkies, will be at home here in one of the 25 Edenic casitas. And when it comes to high-tech ingenuity and comfort, there is not much to compare with the main building, designed by John Heah. Architecture students might describe it as post-modern tropical internationalism. Let's just call it a light, airy, incandescent cube of teak wood and glass.

Playa Grande is operated as a resort course with a private membership component. Plans call for 39 privately owned villas that would qualify for a rental pool. Guests and residents have the run of some pristine beachfront as well as hiking, fishing, kayaking, kite surfing, tennis and whale watching. There's a cigar salon on property with its own private label and local cigar master. And the drink of choice is a Dominican specialty called Mama Juana that consists of a (legal) herbal root mix steeped in rum, red wine and honey.

The price tag for enjoying all of this is not for the faint of pocket book. But as Rees Jones has proved, it's also not your father's golf resort. **Gwk**

PHOTOS COURTESY LAURENCE LAMBRICHT



The ninth hole at Playa Grande along with No. 4 (opposite page, bottom) and No. 17 (this page, below)

RATER'S NOTEBOOK PLAYA GRANDE CLUB

Ease and intimacy of routing: 9

Returning nines, the front nine on the west in a figure eight that crosses over at midpoint and the back nine is a double-counterclockwise loop that briefly turns inland and returns to the water's edge over the final five holes.

Quality of feature shaping: 8

Credit to construction manager Richard Stewart for handling things despite much-delayed shipments of equipment and parts. There's only 35 feet of elevation across the site, but with the straight-line, ruler effect of the ocean as a constant baseline the

shaping and contours exude a more powerful look without being imposing.

Natural setting and overall land plan: 8

Relocating the hotel to the beachfront perimeter freed up the site interior and fosters a sense of contiguous golf, the more so with recreation and real estate also to the side.

Interest of greens and surrounding chipping contours: 8

Tifdwarf Bermudagrass greens average 6,800 square feet, with lots of variety and slope modest enough to provide contrasting hole locations while still being playable in trade winds. Best of all is the offset, staggered

bunkering, presenting many options for approach shots and short-grass recoveries from around and behind.

Variety and memorability of par 3s: 8

All are on the water, but from different sides and angles that provide a bold line and a safer path. Best of the lot might be the 187-yard 17th to a Biarritz-style green on a



point of the coastline.

Variety and memorability of par 4s: 7

The par 4s tend to run inland and right to left. A pair of seemingly similar short par 4s, the eighth and 11th, are distinguished in how their split fairways reward shots played to one side or the other. The unforgettable 16th, evocative in many ways of Pebble Beach's famed eighth hole, presents the choice of an all-or-nothing carry over an inlet or a safer hopscotch path that still requires careful placement.

Variety and memorability of par 5s: 10

Central hazards on the second shots combine

with dramatic angles for the bold of heart willing to risk powerful carries. This is the best collection of par 5s Rees Jones has ever created and arguably the strongest set in the region.

Tree and landscape management: 8

Impressive tree management undertaken here, both in clearing overgrown areas and bringing in thousands of coconut, royal and sabal palms. Views across the site convey an airy feel. With the coastline in full view, a powerfully reclaimed sense of the place emerges that was missing in the previous incarnation of Playa Grande. The next task is to find a suitable native plant that's playable and manageable for peripheral understory areas.

Basic conditioning: 7

Superintendent Eric Davis

often finds that the parts or chemicals he needs are sitting on a dock somewhere. Despite a shortage of local topsoil, he has done a fine job growing in the place.

"Walk in the park" test: 9

Wind, seaside holes, plenty of room to play and a well-connected layout at the base of rugged upland. It all makes for a few stirring hours on a course that is a joy to walk.

Overall: 8.2

Sure to rank among the region's elite. The one limitation is access, as it's on the far side of the island from well-established resort areas. There are, however, a growing number of direct flights from the U.S. and Europe into Puerto Plata International Airport, and from there it's a 50-mile (90-minute) drive that's a colorful encounter with local traffic and towns.



PLAYA GRANDE CLUB

Carr. Rio San Juan, Cabrera KM8, Dominican Republic

playagrande.com; 829-897-5210

Par 72, 5,230-7,259 yards (five sets of tees)

Private membership club open to guests at Amanera Resort; resort green fee is \$420

Walking encouraged; caddies/forecaddies available