ON SITE

Rees Jones’ Mexican Odyssey

Adam Lawrence visits Danzante Bay in Mexico and sees the beginnings of a remarkable Rees Jones course

Mexico’s Baja California peninsula, separated from the main part of the country by the Sea of Cortez and the delta of the Colorado River, is nearly 800 miles of mostly lightly-populated desert, mountain and other countryside. Nearly half the inhabitants of the entire peninsula live in the city of Tijuana, hard against the US border. The beauty of the area, the reliably wonderful weather, and the world-class eco-tourism options, have seen Baja, particular the southern tip of the peninsula known as Los Cabos, undergo a huge amount of tourist development in the last few decades. Golf has played an important and increasingly high profile role in that, from the Nicklaus-designed Cabo del Sol Ocean course, which debuted back in the early 90s, to the two courses at the Diamante resort. The first of those, designed by Davis Love and Paul Cowley, has made a number of world top 100 lists, while the second, El Cardonal, proved to be the first completed course for Tiger Woods’ design firm.

Spurred by the success of the Cabo region, developers have, more recently, looked elsewhere on the peninsula for opportunities. The city of La Paz, capital of Baja California Sur state, looked like becoming another hot spot for golf, with the Costa Baja course, designed by Gary Player’s firm, and Paraiso del Mar, designed by Arthur Hills and Steve Forrest, but the Tom Doak-led Bahia de los Suenos project stalled during the economic downturn. And now, the area around the small town of Loreto, slightly more than half way down the peninsula on the Sea of Cortez, has become the latest part of Baja to see golf development.

Hotelier Owen Perry’s Villa Group is leading the economic recovery in the area. The Villa Group already owns a number of successful properties in Cabo, Cancun and Puerto Vallarta. Its latest project, Villa del Palmar at the Islands of Loreto, is, in many ways, typical of the group’s modus operandi: a large hotel that operates substantially on a timeshare basis. But what’s different is that this one has golf and a unique residential component.

Loreto, though linked by air to Los Angeles, is a town of only 14,000 people. The property found by Perry’s group sits about half an hour south of Loreto, in an isolated bay (a nearby fishing village is the only habitation close by; that village has got electricity for the first time as a result of the development). The hotel opened five years ago, before the golf course was even started, which doubtless made life a little bit more comfortable for architect Rees Jones and his associate Steve Weisser when they travelled to the site.

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The uphill sixteenth hole takes golfers towards the cliff edge, where they are rewarded with the spectacular one-shot seventeenth (below left).

The twelfth, a long par five, is a strong three shot hole which plays down the edge of the hotel to a green situated only yards from the beach.

Thirteen, a par three of 190 yards from the back tee, marks the course’s closest interaction with the sea – the green is practically on the beach, while fourteen, a mid-length par four, plays away from the water and features an excellent green complex that uses a grassy hollow at front left to set up the hole’s strategy.

Holes fifteen and sixteen are both uphill, working their way up another canyon. This valley is pretty tight, and substantial earthworks were necessary to fit the golf holes into the landscape. When the golfer reaches the seventeenth tee, the reason for his journey up the canyon’s slope will be revealed, for the par three penultimate hole is as spectacular a one-shooter as exists on any course in the world.

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After this, the danger is that the home hole might be something of a letdown, but Danzante Bay’s eighteenth is an epically long, downhill par four. Speed slots exist on the fairway to allow correctly positioned drives to run further, but it’s still likely that most players will be hitting a wood, hybrid or at the least, a long iron into the green.

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