



Golfers trek to Baja Sur course, where 17th wows



The cliff-top 17th hole at Danzante Bay, south of Loreto, Mexico. (John Whittle)

Growing numbers come to play, gaze at Danzante Bay near Loreto

By DAVE MCKIBBEN MAY 1, 2019 | 2:02 PM

Fishing poles still outnumber golf bags in the baggage claim terminal at Loreto's tiny airport on Baja Sur's east coast in Mexico, where the balmy, blue-green Sea of Cortez waters are loaded with snapper, grouper, dorado, marlin, sailfish, sea bass and yellowtail tuna. But in the past year, more and more golfers — some of them quite famous — have begun arriving in this small village of 13,000 people that was founded in 1697 by Jesuit missionaries.

Just in the last month, Philadelphia Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie arrived on his private jet and former Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto was here for a week. Some golfers have begun docking their yachts in the bay, climbing on dinghies with their clubs and floating to shore.

The attraction? Legendary golf course architect Rees Jones' latest masterpiece, TPC Danzante Bay at the Islands of Loreto. The course, located 20 miles south of Loreto at the Villa del Palmar Beach Resort & Spa, features an out-of-this-world 17th hole that is perched on a cliff, 250 feet above the tranquil Sea of Cortez. From the back tees, 178 yards away, the peninsula green appears like a sliver. Breaching whales, leaping dolphins and flopping stingrays are often the backdrop while golfers ponder their club choice.



The Villa del Palmar Beach Resort & Spa near Loreto is home to Rees Jones' Danzante Bay golf course. (Chris Duthie)

"It's not the golf that's so tough," said Danzante Bay's head pro Danny Garcia. "It's your imagination and getting caught up in what's around you. Your focus leaves you. When you try to hit the shot, you have to regroup and restart your brain."

Inexplicably, the 17th hole's jaw-dropping location wasn't in the original course design. But that changed when the resort's developer, Owen Perry, took renowned golf course architect Rees Jones up to a ridge and explained his vision for the hole.

"We're standing on the cliff and a few blue whales cruise by; I couldn't have planned it any better," Perry said. "Rees said, 'We're going to have to redo some things, but if you do it, it's going to be one of the best holes in Baja.'"

Mission accomplished. Since opening in December 2017, Danzante Bay's signature 17th hole and the 7,200-yard, par 72 course have captivated the golf industry, winning awards from three noted golf publications, including two Editors' Choice awards from Golf Digest.

On a recent weekday in early April, the course was full of life but not crowded. Rounds of 3 1/2 hours were easily accomplished as golfers navigated their way through valleys, arroyos, dunes and foothills. Every hole includes panoramic views of Danzante Bay, the Sea of Cortez, the Sierra de la Giganta Mountains or the surrounding five Islands of Loreto.

Unlike most resort courses in golf-crazy Cabo, Danzante Bay's fairways are wide enough for the average player, yet still challenging for the low-handicapper.

"Rees and I both felt golf was getting too tough," said Perry, a Rancho Santa Fe resident whose Villa Group manages 12 luxury resorts throughout Mexico. "The average golfer was not enjoying the experience. We wanted to build a course where the resort client could come and have a good day. That was our goal and I think we hit that."

In Cabo, there are 18 resort golf courses lined up along the Baja peninsula. Loreto has just two, Danzante Bay and the Loreto Bay Golf Resort.

"Everybody mentions that this is Cabo 20 years ago," Garcia said. "The golf course and the resort are laid back and peaceful, like the town. Loreto's a magical, undiscovered town. Nobody bothers you."



An aerial view of the Danzante Bay golf course. (John Whittle)

For San Diegans who don't own a private jet or have access to a yacht, the quickest and most inexpensive way to reach Loreto and the 4,500-acre resort is through the Cross Border Xpress in Otay Mesa. Travelers can purchase a \$30 round-trip ticket, and then take a five-minute walk across the border on a pedestrian bridge to the Tijuana International Airport. An 80-minute flight on Calafia and Volaris airlines into Loreto runs about \$150 round trip. Before the Cross Border Xpress opened a little over three years ago, getting to Loreto was a challenge. With no direct flights to Loreto from San Diego, tourists had to drive to Los Angeles for a direct flight.

As more tourists discover the golf course and the plush accommodations at the 188-room Villa del Palmar, Perry knows his resort could quickly become overcrowded. So expansion plans are under way at Danzante Bay, where paving has begun to make way for 140 luxury homes — 11 lots have already been sold. Construction has started on the last of four water desalination plants, and there are plans for a marina, a private beach club, a golf clubhouse, a golf practice facility and more restaurants.

“We have this whole bay to develop,” Perry said.

For now, it's enough for Perry simply to enjoy the panoramic views of Danzante Bay and the islands of Loreto from any one of seven tee boxes on the 17th hole. Chances are, he probably won't be alone. Resorts guests have become fond of hiking up to the hole with the breathtaking views for selfies or group pictures at sunrise, sunset or any time in between.

If you go

Stay

Villa del Palmar Beach Resort & Spa: villadelpalmarloreto.com

Play

TPC Danzante Bay: www.tpcdanzantebay.com

Loreto Bay Golf Resort: www.loretobayresort.com/en

Eat

Danzante: villadelpalmarloreto.com/dining/danzante

El Zopilote Brewing Company: www.facebook.com/elzopilotebrewingloreto

Experience

Cross Border Xpress: www.crossborderexpress.com

Sabila Spa: villadelpalmarloreto.com/sabila-spa

Danzante Tours: www.viajesdanzante.com

San Francisco Javier Mission: www.loreto.com/san-francisco-javier-mission-loreto

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