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LOS CABOS
MEXICO'S GOLF
PARADISE

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WORLD OF
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Mexico's GOLF MECCA

Surrounded by stunning ocean waters and blessed with near-perfect weather, Los Cabos is the ideal spot for a luxury golf vacation

BY JEFF WILLIAMS

The long cart ride up the mountain, an ascent of several hundred feet that's more like trekking than golf, brings you to one of the most spectacular summits in the game, the fifth tee at Quivira Golf Club. This spot is the very pinnacle of golf in Los Cabos, Mexico.

The short par 4 is cut into the side of the mountain, like a balcony on a cruise ship. As you stand on the tee with the Pacific Ocean below you and the wind rustling your hair, you can be excused for thinking that you are playing golf in the kingdom.

In this case, it's Jack Nicklaus' kingdom, for it was the Golden Bear who was at the center of the golf movement in Los Cabos in the early 1990s. Nicklaus has six courses in the area, and he remains central to this region, which has emerged as one of the world's hot spots for golf development. Quivira is his latest Cabo masterpiece.

Sitting at the southernmost end of the 760-mile-long Baja Peninsula, Mexico's Los Cabos region has grown from a sleepy fishing spot into a high-end golf destination with an impressive array of courses and luxury resorts. Many of the tracks have been created by

The picturesque but well-guarded sixth at Quivira Golf Club in Los Cabos, Mexico. Danger has never looked so beautiful.

BRIAN OAR





Palmilla has three nine-hole courses by Jack Nicklaus, including Ocean Course (top) and Arroyo (above, left). Today, the Golden Bear has six courses in the area, more than any other designer.

some of the biggest names in golf design. Tom Fazio, Robert Trent Jones Jr. and Greg Norman have all opened courses here, along with big-name players such as Davis Love III and Fred Couples. It's also the home of the first course designed by Tiger Woods. Today, there are 14 golf courses in Los Cabos, with two more in the works and one under renovation. Cabo is in the midst of a major golf boom.

Golf in Los Cabos is all about the grandeur of the desert landscape surrounded by the Pacific Ocean on the west and the Sea of Cortez to the east, with the Sierra de la Laguna mountain chain running through the middle. The air here is warm, but comfortably dry most of the year, so breaking a sweat here is a rarity. You'll find yourself reaching for the cell phone to snap shots of the spectacular vistas and there is an aesthetic here that carries from course to course, hole to hole. The courses are tough, and you might struggle to break par, but you won't care.

You could start where it began, at the 27 holes at Nicklaus' Palmilla, which he opened in 1992. At Palmilla, you will get a complete schooling on what golf in Cabo means as you play

through the desert, across the sand washes and along craggy outcroppings as you move down to the sea. Or look upon the fifth hole of the Mountain Nine at Palmilla. The par 4 is defined by the arroyo that snakes across the hole, carved through the landscape. You need to carry your tee shot across the arroyo, then play your approach shot across the very same obstacle. Hitting two safe balls here, even if you don't make par, is a memory-making experience.

"I love this place," Nicklaus said about Cabo, standing on the grounds of Quivira when it opened in 2016. Quivira is over the mountain to the west of the city of San Lucas, located practically on the very southernmost point of the Baja Peninsula. "I used to come down here and fish and now I come down here and work. We introduced the game of golf to Cabo, and it exploded."

The rise of golf has changed things considerably in Cabo. "I'm known by most of my friends as the guy who ruined Cabo," Nicklaus said. "I showed up at the airport in the '60s with 20 bucks, a pair of sandals and a T-shirt and you could spend a week. Now, you can't get out of the airport for that. My friends said when you added golf, it changed the whole economic structure of Cabo."

Golf pro Brad Wheatley has been a part of the Los Cabos scene since the early '90s. "When I came down here, I think we had two or three flights from the U.S. that came in two or three times a week. Maybe a total of five international flights a week. Now, we have something like 47 international flights a day. The place has just taken off."

Wheatley was the pro who opened Nicklaus' Palmilla facility, and now will open Norman's Rancho San Lucas course. He's fallen in love with the Cabo lifestyle. "Some of the best weather in the world," he says. "Great golf, great fishing, great accommodations, great food scene. You are talking about an ideal combination of things."

The Dunes, designed by Love III, sits on a substantial amount of oceanfront property. "You're either playing toward the ocean, along the ocean or away from the ocean," says Love III. "True links land." The course, which undulates around the many sand dunes found near this part of the Pacific, demands forced carries over hazards to undulating landing areas. Even the practice facility here is grand, spread across 14 acres, with shaded seating areas flanked by picturesque walls of stone. (Like many of the finer Cabo courses, The Dunes is part of a private resort, so playing requires either membership or a hotel stay.)

Not all the golf in Cabo is on the ocean's edge. Diamante's El Cardonal, the first course designed by Tiger Woods, is a bit inland, carefully sculpted through arroyo country. It's more than 7,300

CABO GOLF 101

GET THE BALL IN THE AIR

You won't find the fairways stretching right up to the tees on many holes in Los Cabos. You might think that you are in the land of the forced carry. You need to get your ball airborne here. With that in mind, it's important to play the correct tees. Try to be a hero and you might have to do the walk of shame and buy another dozen balls at the turn—at resort prices.

STAY TO PLAY

Most of the newer courses in Los Cabos are part of residential resort developments and are not open to the general public. Access to these courses can be gained by staying at specific hotels: figure on four figures a night in the higher season for very plush accommodations. (See story on hotels in Los Cabos, page 86.) Investing in a property is another way to gain access. Los Cabos has become a second-home destination for many Californians and Texans.

IT'S A DRY HEAT

It can get warm in Cabo, but it's rarely humid. That means you'll be comfortable when you play. Cabo is marvelous December through April, and the May and June shoulder season combines good weather with better deals. July and August are the hottest months, with the highest chances of rain.

CREATURE COMFORTS

Cabo courses are known for wonderful comfort stations serving food and drink. The Dunes course has a slider bar, built among the boulders like something out of "The Flintstones." Quivira has three, including one with a full bar serving freshly prepared tacos and enchiladas. And the best thing about all these comfort stations? They are gratis.



Greg Norman, who already has one course in Los Cabos, is working on the new Rancho San Lucas. "I had just perfect terrain to work with," he says.

yards from the tips, but five tee boxes—and choosing the correct tees to play from—opens it up to all types of players. "It would be nice to have all of us, dad, mom, kids, all play the same lines—different tee boxes but the same lines," said Woods at Cardonal before it opened in 2014. Woods' Oasis Short Course, which is also on the property, is an ideal place for children, one of few options in Cabo for kids. It also makes a great practice facility for adults looking to hone their short games.

First-time visitors will likely smile at the look of the generous fairways found on so many of Cabos' courses. Having big fairways in here is essential, given that the wind can get pretty sporty, especially in the spring.

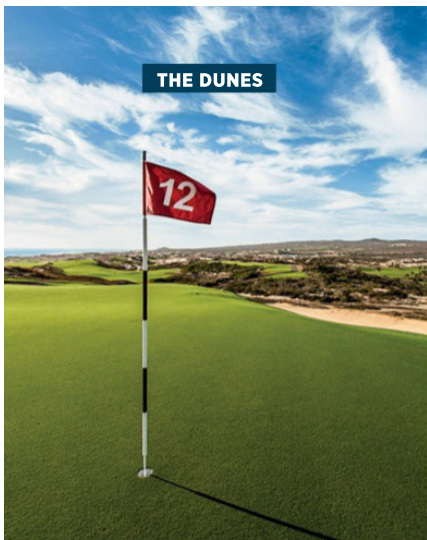
"It gets extremely windy off the Pacific three or four months out of the year," says Greg Norman, who has more than 100 courses to his name. He designed the nine-hole Mission Course at Puerto Los Cabos, and is now finishing up work on a piece of land at Rancho San Lucas, from beachfront to dunescape to the

"I love this place. I used to come down here and fish, and now I come down here and work. We introduced the game of golf to Cabo, and it exploded." —*Jack Nicklaus*

mountains' edge. The Shark knows the importance of a big landing area here. "Our fairways have to be a lot broader," he says. "Holes into the wind you can't make too long, holes downwind you can't make too short."

Norman hopes the first nine at Rancho San Lucas will be open by October, with the second nine opening some time after. "We have 13 holes that have a view of the Pacific Ocean," he says. "The long views are spectacular. I had just perfect terrain to work with."

THE DUNES



The Dunes, designed by Davis Love III, is one of many superb and stunningly beautiful golf courses in Los Cabos. It has a 14-acre practice area, as well as a stately clubhouse (above).

On the other side of the Cabo cape, near the Sea of Cortez, is Costa Palmas, scheduled to open this fall, when the new Four Seasons is operational. The project also includes a substantial marina. “We’re having a tremendous amount of fun with it,” says Bruce Charlton, partner and lead designer for Robert Trent Jones Jr. “We send you out on a kind of dunes experience through the first six, seven holes. We get you out looking at the ocean. From there we go inland and upland, more of a desert landscape, and we finish down by the marina.” He promises the course will have plenty of room to maneuver the ball.

Nicklaus’ Cabo gem, Quivira, has received a host of accolades. Playing the first four holes are a delightful warmup as to what’s to come. Then you get to the fifth, the short par 4 above the Pacific, and you have a decision to make. Accomplished players might try to drive the green. If you can hit your drive around 230 from the men’s tees, there is a slope that can carry the ball all the way down to the green, a feature that Nicklaus insisted on.

After hitting your drive, stop at the first of the course’s comfort stations, located at the back of the tee complex, a

perfect place to grab a taco and a *cerveza*. (The men’s room has a cactus in it. Be careful.) As you make your way to the seventh hole you will pass the region’s original lighthouse at Kilometer Zero, the point where the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific meet. On the back nine, take note when you complete the fun, double dogleg 12th, a par 5. You’ll notice some spiked fence uprights paralleling the green, leftover props from the 2004 Brad Pitt film *Troy*, which was filmed on the beach long before the golf course was built.

Back in the 1990s, Nicklaus designed the Ocean Course at Cabo del Sol. It closed for a renovation in May and is slated to reopen at the end of the year, with the two closing holes being removed and new ones being added. The 16th will become the 18th, finishing on a cliff above the water. If you visit before the work is complete, don’t overlook the property’s Desert Course. It’s a well-conceived tract by Tom Weiskopf with some daunting sand washes, but a lot of fairway space.

Chileno Bay, by Tom Fazio, and Twin Dolphin, by Fred Couples, play on the inland side of the road off the Corridor highway and offer sweeping views of the Sea of Cortez and mesmerizing desert golf experiences. Both have exceedingly generous fairways and desert-sized sand features. Chileno Bay is part of Discovery Land Co., famous for its comfort stations. Here you’ll find endless supplies of candy as well as free-flowing Casamigos. (Discovery’s Mike Meldman was a partner with George Clooney and Rande Gerber in the Tequila brand.) The two Red Door comfort stations at Twin Dolphin Golf Club are sleek, open-air cafes with big televisions. There’s no rush to continue play. A chef will dish out the Mexican specialties.

No rush is what it’s all about in Cabo, where the expanding golf experience is an abiding one with unfailingly friendly staff and exceptional amenities. With a smile, Nicklaus says he ruined Cabo. But the Golden Bear tracks he put down have set the standard for one of the world’s finest golf destinations, one that ought to be on every player’s bucket list. ♦

Jeff Williams is a CIGAR AFICIONADO contributing editor.