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Golf's best kept secret?

Playa Grande has remained under the radar for most travelling golfers. But a substantial redesign is in progress and a spectacular new course is emerging on the clifftops of the Dominican Republic's north coast. Toby Ingleton discovers more

Once the approach to the sixteenth green has been negotiated, golfers must prepare themselves for the par-three seventeenth, where a Biarritz green lies in wait at the very end of the point

“The ocean is visible from every hole,” says Rees Jones, as we hurtle along the coastal highway from Puerto Plata airport towards Playa Grande, on the north coast of Dominican Republic. I’m struggling to take my eyes off the road, unable to work out who is in a greater rush, our driver or the helmetless motorcyclists that seem to be coming from every direction.

Jones and his senior designer Bryce Swanson appear to have noticed my whitening knuckles, and are offering some points of distraction. They have taken the sixty minute journey many times over the previous two years, since being asked to redesign a course that was originally laid out by Jones’ father, Robert Trent, and Roger Rulewich in the late 1990s.

Trent Jones was originally appointed to create the golf course at Playa Grande by the government of the Dominican Republic, who had seen how resorts like Casa de Campo and Punta Cana had stimulated economic growth in the southeast of the country and wanted more of the same for the north coast.

“My father told the Dominicans that God had intended for this land to be a golf course,” says Jones. When we arrive, it’s easy to see why. As we exit the highway and

emerge from the lush forest, the spectacular cliff-top golf course begins to reveal itself. The Dominican people have taken Trent Jones’ declaration to heart and the golf course has become so revered that, in order to preserve its existence, the government has imposed strict regulations that allowed only minimal shifting of golf holes.

This could have posed a problem for Jones’ redesign, were it not for the excellent routing created by his father in the first place. After two opening par-fours, the golfer arrives at the first oceanside hole, the 250-yard par-three third. This is followed by a par five that continues to skirt the cliffs to a green at the far westernmost spot on the property. From here, the player can look back to a series of points that jut out from the coastline, creating numerous bays where the surf crashes against rock and beach.

It’s a moment to pause and take in the surroundings before the course takes one of just two more journeys inland, for holes five and six, and later for holes ten to thirteen. You probably can see the sea from every hole, but these short inland sojourns, towards the dense forest that provides a backdrop to the site, help to pace the round, giving it a sense of ebb and flow before culminating in a spectacular cliffhanging finish.

All told, ten holes run directly to or alongside cliffs, and the multiple bays formed by the rugged coastline make each hole – and its views – unique. It’s initially difficult to understand why the course has not attracted a higher profile.

Upon closer inspection though, it seems that a series of changes in ownership have prevented the course from reaching its full potential. Now in the hands of private equity firm Dolphin Capital Investors, who specialise in resort development, Playa Grande is getting the investment it requires to truly capitalise on its strong routing and outstanding site.

At the time of our visit, the front nine was as yet untouched. But Jones and Swanson’s redesign of the back nine was at an advanced stage of grow-in, and all but complete. It was a unique window of time in which the stark contrast between pre- and post-renovation course could be fully appreciated.

The first notable change is in the style of bunkering. Gone are the clean ovals with protruding tongues and in come ragged-edged faces, which perfectly complement the rugged nature of the site. “I describe it as going back to the future,” says Jones. “We have retained the strategy and some of the placements of the original bunkering, but



Skyline greens at the seventeenth and (right) fourteenth; Rees Jones (far right) reviews plans with course constructor Richard Stevens





The front nine, as yet untouched by the redesign, traverses the cliffs at holes seven (top) and eight (bottom left); recent maintenance has led to shrinkage of the greens



given it a character that is more in keeping with modern preferences.”

The greens are equally transformational. It is difficult to give a fair comparison to the originals, as the recent maintenance regime has seen the existing greens shrink well within their intended boundaries. Nevertheless, the new greens are characterised by large sweeping curves that create a number of smaller target areas. Combined with placement of bunkers that typically leaves part of the green open, this makes approach play inviting for the average player but will require precision to get close to pins.

But perhaps the most striking contrast between the two nines comes from the landscaping itself. The redesigned back nine somehow feels more entwined in its natural setting, with fingers of the surrounding forest seeming to reach into the course. In comparison, the maintained turf that currently blankets the front nine seems particularly incongruous.

Environmental considerations aside, the new landscaping has the dual effect of giving each hole a sense of isolation and

individual identity, as well as making the golf course feel like it has emerged from nature, rather than having been imposed on it. What’s more, this has been achieved without constraining play into narrow corridors. The updated golf course feels ‘eminently fair’, a sentiment that might appeal to its original architect.

There have been some changes to the routing, to allow for the construction of a new AmanResorts luxury boutique hotel at the easternmost point of the course, which will overlook the picture-postcard Playa Grande beach. This has also allowed the architects to set up a grandstand finish. The dog-leg par-five fourteenth takes now takes players to the corner of the course, close to the hotel site and also overlooking the beach.

From there, the final four holes play along the cliffs. The fifteenth and sixteenth play in the reverse direction to the original twelfth and thirteenth holes, so the right handed golfer now plays facing, rather than with his back to, the sea. The par-three seventeenth plays directly along a rocky outcrop to a reshaped Biarritz green.

The final hole is a par-five, where a long precise drive will kick the ball forward, presenting the player with the last of five opportunities in the round for a heroic shot from one cliffside to another. If the nerves are frayed by that point, the player can negotiate a longer route around. But the chance for glory will prove irresistible for most.

The work completed offers a tantalising taster for the final product. Plans for the front nine include exposing rock for a drainage channel that runs across the nine and some regrading work: “By cutting away at some of the raised areas, we will open up the vistas towards the sea,” says Swanson. It will be fascinating to see how it turns out.

The owners are aiming for completion of the project by the second quarter of 2015, in advance of the popular winter season. If the architects can achieve the same on the front nine as they have on the back, this sleeping giant of a course will be roused. **GCA**

