

# GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

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# Rees Jones' Mexican Odyssey

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

*The green of the fourteenth at Danzante Bay is protected by a single bunker. The par four fifteenth and par four closing hole can be seen in the background*

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.

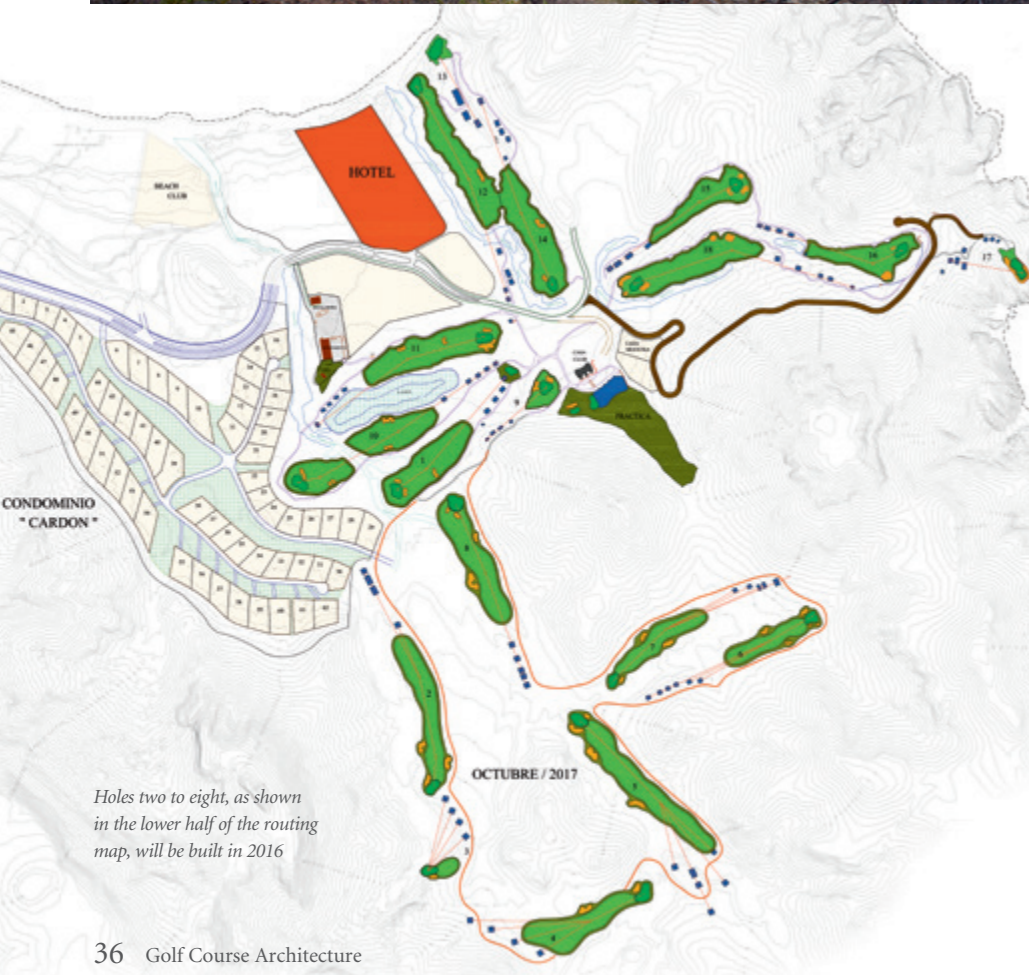
Hotelier Owen Perry's Villa Group is leading the economic recovery in the area. The Villa Group already owns a number of successful properties in Cabo, Cancun and Puerto Vallarta. Its latest project, Villa del Palmar at the Islands of Loreto, is, in many ways, typical of the group's modus operandi: a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

**“The run home from the twelfth will be highly dramatic”**

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.

It's a fascinating piece of property, effectively divided into four sections. Four holes occupy the valley just inland of the hotel, while three more play down to the beach and back in a sand dune environment. Small pockets of residential lots are



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



integrated into the routing to preserve the overall golf experience. Holes two to eight, which are expected to be completed by the fall of 2017, will move back and forth up, across and down a canyon, while holes fifteen and sixteen climb to the spectacular seventeenth hole, set on the cliffs above the Sea of Cortez, before the final hole takes players back to the clubhouse area. Each zone has its own characteristics, which will be reflected in the holes. “We see Danzante Bay as part desert, part mountain and part sand dune,” says Weisser, who has run the project for the Jones firm.

The first hole, as well as holes nine to eleven, occupy the valley, though the ninth uses the side of the mountain well to create an attractive drop shot par three. The canyon that will be home to holes two to eight is dramatic ground, with dry river beds setting up potentially excellent risk reward shots. But the real excitement of the course (which is known as Danzante Bay) lies in the beachfront holes and the three closers. The run home from the twelfth will be highly dramatic.

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-shotter as exists on any course in the world.

With tees set high up the cliff, the hole stretches to 178 yards, though the downhill nature makes it play a club or two shorter than this distance. The cliffs at this point are

jagged in the extreme, and in fact, from the back tees, the water in the cove down at the bottom between tee and green is just about visible. Several sets of tees range around the hillside, setting up different angles of approach; it is a matter of some debate among

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the construction team as to which provides the most interesting shot. All, though, have to deal with a green that is set on a rock outcrop with huge falloffs on three sides down to the Sea of Cortez. Oftentimes, the grey whales that migrate from here all the way to Alaska each year will be visible from tee and green.

From the back tee, the green is shallow but wide. Move round to the front tee, though, and the angle changes, making a running shot into the flag quite appealing. It is a remarkable hole, as interesting golf-wise as it is spectacular, and it’s quite understandable why Perry and Jones felt the need to change their initial routing (and knock down some quite sizeable rock outcrops) to make it possible. Weisser says that Owen and Rees knew that the seventeenth would be a special hole. “We decided to change the initial routing so we could create one of the most memorable holes we have ever designed,” he explains. “Now that the hole is built, I don’t think anyone is in any doubt that we did the right thing.”

After this, the danger is that the home hole might be something of a letdown, but Danzante Bay’s eighteenth is an epicly 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. **GCA**