



Photo: Larry Lambrecht

The par-four sixth hole on the renovated Ocean course at The Breakers

Great expectations

THE BREAKERS OCEAN COURSE, FLORIDA, USA

Toby Ingleton follows in the footsteps of America's gilded elite to visit The Breakers in Palm Beach, Florida, where Rees Jones has just completed a renovation of the resort's Ocean course

When American industrialist Henry Flagler developed a railway along Florida's east coast in the late nineteenth century, he ushered in a period of development that would transform the state. Before his standard gauge tracks arrived, Miami was just a small settlement with a handful of inhabitants.

But Flagler hadn't originally planned to extend the railroad quite so far south. Its terminus was to be Palm Beach, where America's elite could spend their winters at his hotels, first the Royal Poinciana and, in 1896, The Palm Beach Inn, which a few years later would be renamed The Breakers, having become synonymous with the crashing waves

beneath the hotel's Atlantic-view rooms. The Royal Poinciana closed during the height of the Great Depression, but The Breakers remains a mainstay of a luxury Palm Beach lifestyle. The original hotel was destroyed by fire in 1903 and again in 1925, after which it was rebuilt to a design by New York architects Schultze and



The renovation of the Ocean course at The Breakers has seen bunkering reduced to about two-thirds of the previous total, all now strategically placed



Photo: Larry Lambrecht

The greens at The Breakers have distinctive backboards, as can be seen here on the closing hole

Weaver. Their vision for The Breakers was inspired by the Villa Medici in Rome, and 75 artisans were brought in from Italy to paint the astoundingly ornate ceilings in the lobby and throughout the first floor.

The opulent hotel sets an incredibly high standard that guests will expect to also be met by its two golf courses. One of those is a short drive directly west of the resort and was completely rebuilt by Rees Jones in 2004. Clearly satisfied with his work there, in 2018 the owners returned to Jones to explore

the potential for the Ocean course, where the turf was reaching the end of its lifecycle, providing a sensible opportunity to re-evaluate the design.

The Ocean course has its place in history, with an original nine holes laid out by Alexander Finlay in 1897 making it the oldest layout in Florida. But the brief for Jones and his design associate Steve Weisser was to create a modern, functional course that would make the most of its small site and provide resort guests with an experience fit for those high expectations set by the hotel.

The course's property is bisected by two roads, creating four quadrants, each comprising four or five holes. This meant there was little flexibility with the routing itself, so Jones' focus for the redesign was to maximise the golf that could be delivered.

"We wanted to show that you can create a great golf experience on a compact site," says Jones. "And we wanted to provide the resort golfer with an enjoyable round while also being able to challenge the better golfer."

Perhaps counterintuitively – one

might expect all features on a relatively small site to be scaled down – Jones has increased the total acreage of greens by almost 50 per cent.

The larger putting surfaces have sweeping undulation and give the resort the ability to set demanding pin positions if they want to raise the level of challenge. But keeping the resort golfer in mind, each is also accessible from a running shot.

Each of the greens – which are varied in depth, shape and size – has slopes which serve as a backstop, making

them unlike other Florida golf courses.

As well as giving the course a unique and memorable identity, the backstops help keep overhit shots on the putting surface while encouraging an imaginative short game from behind the greens. With some hole locations, golfers will have a compelling alternative to aiming at the flag.

Many of the changes introduced with the renovation will free up resources for the maintenance staff.

For a start, all turf on the golf course has been converted to paspalum –

except the TifEagle bermuda greens, with a collar of TifGrand to prevent cross-contamination – which means the club no longer has a resource-intensive cycle of overseeding.

Also, bunkering on the course has been reduced considerably, to about two-thirds of the previous total. Those that remain are all strategically placed; cautious golfers might opt for a long iron more often than driver.

With white sand flashed up the front faces, bunkers are all visible and quite imposing from a distance. But that is



From left, Ocean course superintendent Justin Gille; architects Steve Weisser and Rees Jones; The Breakers' director of grounds and maintenance Mark Reid; The Breakers' Rees Jones course superintendent Eric Snell; and Eric Barnes, the project manager from Landscapes Unlimited

something of a deception – they are not as deep as they appear, making recovery fairly straightforward. They have been lined using Capillary Concrete, and Mark Reid, the resort's director of grounds and maintenance, reckons this is saving between 100 and 200 man-hours after every storm, as there has been zero washout to date.

Jones and his team have added a little extra yardage to the par-70 course, the total distance coming in just shy of 6,000 yards. There are now four sets of tees, with the most forward set a little over 4,000 yards. "You could hit driver on almost every hole," says Jones. This is true for the 99 per cent of golfers that will play the course and it is very refreshing to see a layout designed for the golfing majority.

Holes of note include the sixth, a 383-yard par four that wraps around a lake and provides the option for a heroic approach to what appears to

be a slither of green. The tenth takes golfers to a particularly tranquil corner of the course and a glimpse of the Atlantic from the raised green, and the

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197-yard sixteenth is perhaps the most challenging par three, where right or long will find water.

But one of the highlights of the redesign is its impact on the property as a whole. The entire eastern segment of the site was raised, meaning that golfers on each side of the South County Road can see right across the course, cleverly tying the quadrants more closely together. Selective tree removal has also helped open up vistas, bringing the outside in, and inside out. Locals can now see right into the

course, while golfers can admire some of the charming buildings beyond the perimeter, like the colonial-style Royal Poinciana Chapel behind the sixth

green and the grand Flagler Museum behind the fourth green.

The quality of finish is exceptional – as has been the case on every Jones course I have seen. With credit to Reid's "wizard skills", his team – led by Justin Gille, the Ocean course superintendent – and construction firm Landscapes Unlimited, in just a few months after opening the surfaces are pristine and the detailing, from tee boxes to bulkheads, is faultless. Jones did not call in artisans from Italy, but he has delivered a golf experience worthy of a fine resort. **GCA**