



Golf Life: ‘Pebble Beach-plus site’ reopens in Dominican Republic

Anytime someone starts comparing a course to Pebble Beach Golf Links, there’s a natural tendency to say: Hold on, pump the brakes, take a deep breath.

Those comparisons, however, keep coming up with regard to Playa Grande, the cliffside course on the Dominican Republic’s northern coast that Robert Trent Jones Sr. originally built in the mid-1990s.

“These are higher cliffs than Pebble Beach, and there are more holes on the ocean than Pebble Beach,” architect Rees Jones said. “The reason I’ve been so much in love with this project is it’s such a great site, it’s a Pebble Beach-plus site.”

Less than three years ago, Playa Grande reopened to strong reviews following an extensive Rees Jones renovation of his father’s work. It seemed like a fitting complement to the luxurious hotel that graces the property, Amanera. But Jones’ time on property was just beginning.

In December 2016, Discovery Land Co. closed on the purchase of the hotel, golf course and 2,400 acres, and called in Jones to take another crack at the project.



Holes No. 17 and 18 at Playa Grande play right along the Caribbean Sea. (Playa Grande)

“The thinking was the golf course was incredible,” said Dave Gordon, Discovery Land’s business manager on the project. “It was clear that there were some constraints when he first renovated it, and those were capital constraints. ... We told Rees we wanted to go back in and spend whatever it takes to re-envision the course and make it into the incredible course that he and his father envisioned.”

Anyone familiar with Discovery Land knows the company has a well-heeled clientele that expects the best and has no qualms paying for it. The company wanted to create a golf experience that took greatest advantage of the clifftop setting and also opened up more ocean views for homesites. Playa Grande reopened this month, and Jones believes it’s a course that everyone will enjoy.

“This is a golf course that anybody can play,” Jones said. “We designed it so that you can go around the trouble and good players can flirt with the ocean. It has more shot options because of the way the ocean weaves in and out.”

Among the design changes: The entire course was re-grassed with Pure Dynasty Paspalum, which is ideal for seaside settings and gave it “that popping green” aesthetic, Gordon said; all of the bunkers were redone with bright white Maryland sand; the fifth hole was reoriented toward the mountains; and new back tees were added on half the holes. New drainage also was installed.



Drainage is key for the course, given the heavy rainy season in the Dominican Republic.

“It rains quite a bit in the Dominican, so we want people playing within 15 minutes of a heavy rain,” Gordon said. “You can’t have enough drainage at a course like this.”

Now, Gordon said, Playa Grande is “the best golf course in Discovery’s portfolio.” That’s not a statement lightly made. Discovery’s portfolio includes such highly ranked courses as Estancia in Arizona, Mountaintop in North Carolina, Gozzer Ranch in Idaho, Vaquero in Texas and The Madison Club in California.

“I think it’s the most dramatic (Discovery course), with most of the course sitting on 80-foot cliffsides overlooking the Atlantic,” Gordon said. “Ten holes play directly on the Atlantic. Every tee box and green has views of the water. In my view, it’s sort of Pebble Beach in the Caribbean, with even more drama because you have a mountain behind you as well.”

There’s that Pebble Beach comparison again. But as with everything it does, Discovery Land adds its own distinctive touches.

The practice range was completely redone with paspalum grass, new bunkering and Las Brasas, a golf barbecue joint where members can congregate.

Jones said the practice facility reminded him of the advice his family used to hear from World Golf Hall of Famer Herb Graffis, who, among other things, created several golf publications in the early 20th century and co-founded the National Golf Foundation. Graffis, Jones said, advised that if you wanted to expand golf participation, practice facilities should be turned into “golf parks” where people of all ages can gather.

“It’s a lifestyle change on the practice facility,” Jones said. “It’s not just hitting balls, it’s interacting with people, being social. It’s got to be one of the greatest practice facilities that we’ve created.”

Las Brasas is one of three “comfort stations” being built on the course. Anyone who has played Discovery Land courses knows the creative comfort stations are all a part of the experience.

Gordon said work recently was completed on The Point, which he described as a tree bar on the cliffside near the fourth green. The company also is building a cantilevered comfort station with a drop-down deck near the 16th tee.

Gordon said there will be only 60 homesites in the golf course neighborhood and 16 clubhouse suites, with four pods built in four units. He anticipates work on a pool and gym will start in 2019, and work on a clubhouse restaurant and bar will start in 2020. **Gwk**