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ON SITE

Symphony of sand

COSTA PALMAS, MEXICO

Adam Lawrence visits the new
Costa Palmas course on the Sea of Cortes

The second green and par-three third hole, which plays directly towards the Sea of Cortes

The area of Baja California in Mexico known as Los Cabos has been a popular tourist destination for sunseeking Americans for many years. Initially developed with sport fishing in mind, the region quickly became a regular venue for young spring break travellers. Golf has been a part of the development mix in the region for over 25 years, and in the last five years or so, since the opening of the Diamante development, it has taken a big step upmarket.

Costa Palmas is another part of that step, but it also represents the first spread of golf development into the eastern area of Los Cabos, on the Sea of Cortes rather than the Pacific. Los Angeles based developer Irongate is behind the 1,000 acre property, which is about an hour's drive from Los Cabos International Airport. The first hotel, a Four Seasons property, has already opened along with the golf course, while the second, Mexico's first Aman resort, is currently under construction, as is a substantial marina and a housing component.

Given these development goals, it is easy to see that Costa Palmas will be an extremely high-end destination, alongside the likes of Diamante and the new Twin Dolphin development. Those two in particular have seen Cabo's golf offering, which was already of high quality – Cabo del Sol is regarded as one of the Nicklaus firm's very best courses – take a significant stride. Can Costa Palmas be a part of the same conversation?

Firstly, we should say that it is a beautiful spot. Sandy, like most of the region, and with miles and miles of



continuous beach, it is hard to imagine a more idyllic location for a golf course. As at Twin Dolphin, but unlike say Diamante, most of the seafront land is reserved for hotels and housing, with the golf course set back from the beach, though given that most holes have a clear view of the water, it is arguable how much of a difference this makes.

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“We were given a spectacular site and shaped a golf course generous to the golfer that takes advantage of ocean views without being right on the water,” says Robert Trent Jones Jr. “The challenge will come into play as the contouring around the green complexes can either be forgiving or rejecting. It will take an imaginative short game to get the ball on the green.”

Several of the Jones company’s staff were involved at Costa Palmas, with associate Mike Gorman, chief design officer Bruce Charlton and Jones himself all visiting the property on numerous occasions during construction. Jones describes the course as “a golf symphony composed of three movements and

two transitions.” The first six holes, he says, are linksy, a dunescape, while the par five seventh, with its natural arroyo, serves as a transition to the course’s second movement – six ‘upland’ holes that include views of the Sierra de la Laguna mountains. These holes provide players with wide landing areas, but trees and bunkers mean golfers will have to choose

club and shot selection carefully. The final section of the course are holes alongside the currently under construction marina so it is a little difficult, right now, to get a great feeling for what the environment of these holes will be once the building is complete.

I’ve heard the ‘symphony’ analogy applied to golf courses before; if you consider the four movements of the typical symphony, they are connected thematically, but to a non-specialist listener, they resemble individual, separate pieces of music. A golf course, with eighteen holes moving through a landscape, can equally have varied themes that define sections.

At Costa Palmas, the conclusion to the golf course, the marina section, will be quite different from the earlier parts, but the transition from dunes to upland is quite subtle. The vegetation changes, with more trees in the upland



Photo: Ryan Schiller

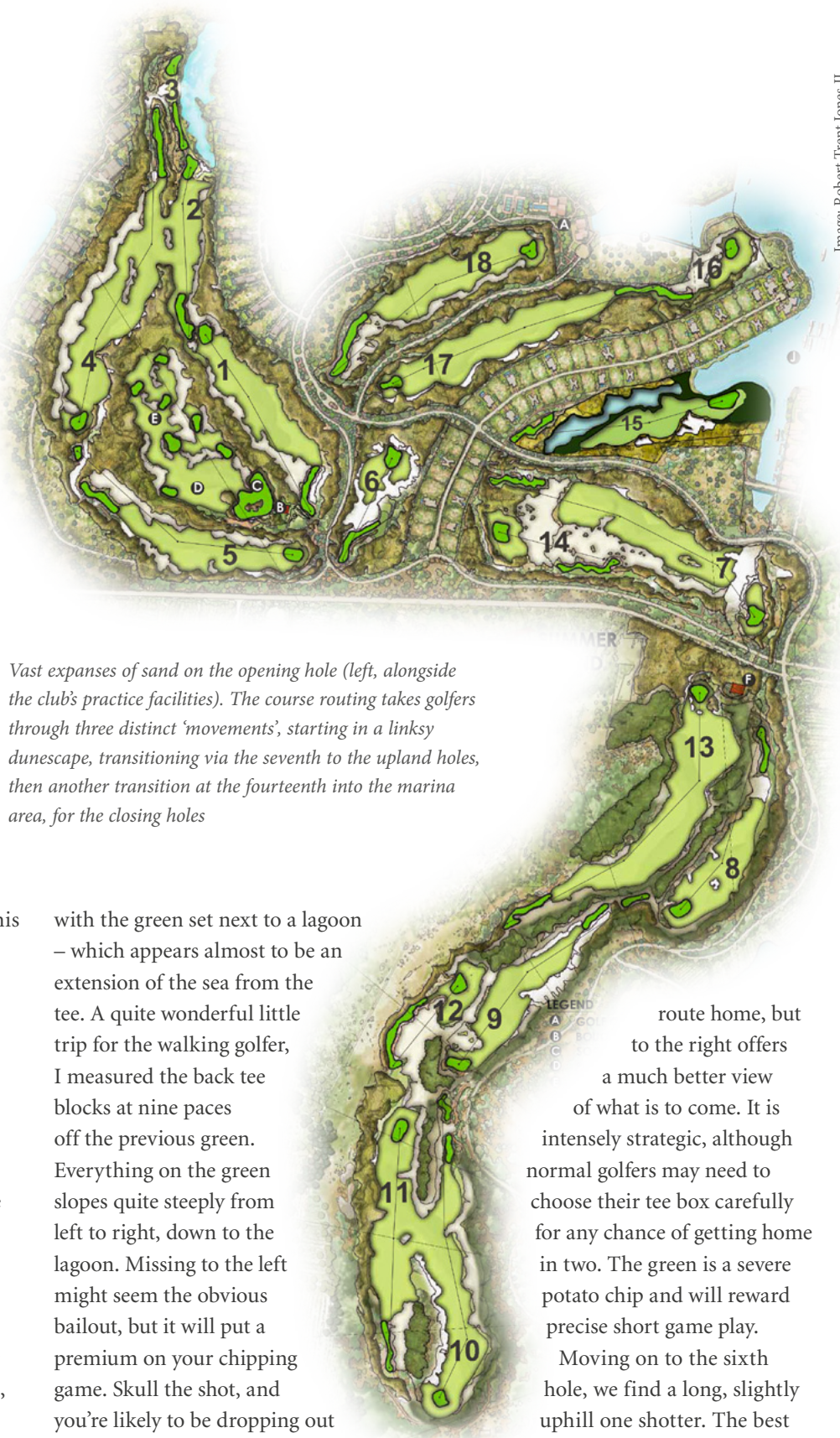


Image: Robert Trent Jones II

Vast expanses of sand on the opening hole (left, alongside the club's practice facilities). The course routing takes golfers through three distinct 'movements', starting in a linksy dunescape, transitioning via the seventh to the upland holes, then another transition at the fourteenth into the marina area, for the closing holes

areas, but you may have to look for this symphonic transition to recognise it.

Costa Palmas does not begin and end in the same place. Golfers will ride from the clubhouse past length of the eighteenth to the first tees, located alongside a substantial practice area, which includes a range, a 30,000-square-foot putting course with lighting for night play, a six hole short course and its own restaurant, Bouchie's. The eighteenth will take golfers back to the main clubhouse, close to the hotel development.

The opening hole sets the theme for the course. It is effectively bunkerless, yet surrounded by sand. These huge areas of exposed sand are the dominant visual experience at Costa Palmas, and they have an important role in how the course plays, because finding aiming points is very tricky.

The par three third takes golfers close to the Sea of Cortes. A very pretty hole

with the green set next to a lagoon – which appears almost to be an extension of the sea from the tee. A quite wonderful little trip for the walking golfer, I measured the back tee blocks at nine paces off the previous green. Everything on the green slopes quite steeply from left to right, down to the lagoon. Missing to the left might seem the obvious bailout, but it will put a premium on your chipping game. Skull the shot, and you're likely to be dropping out of the lagoon for your fourth. I think this is the best par three, and one of the best holes, on the course.

The fourth hole is a very long par five, with a split fairway created by a long, sinuous bunker in the driving zone. Going left of the bunker is the shorter

route home, but to the right offers a much better view of what is to come. It is intensely strategic, although normal golfers may need to choose their tee box carefully for any chance of getting home in two. The green is a severe potato chip and will reward precise short game play.

Moving on to the sixth hole, we find a long, slightly uphill one shotter. The best option appears to be to run a

ball into the green up the left side; a little strip of bunker at front right is very scary – especially from the tee. The back right corner of the green is extremely steep: the hole is at its most challenging when pins are placed there.



The view from the tee of the seventh, an uphill par five, is very open: there is a great deal of width on offer, though much of it is sand. A large central bunker built into a big mound dominates the second landing zone, while a wide, shallow arroyo fronts the green. On this hole particularly the sheer expanse of bare sand toys with visuals and makes club selection difficult.

Another central bunker is to be found on the mid-length par four eighth. Cut nicely into a landform, it dominates

green from the right side of the fairway – and the longer the drive, the better the view – but the sand fronting the putting surface is scary. Thankfully, at the end of such a savage hole, the green is fairly forgiving, with punchbowl qualities.

Another theme of the course is the tees. In a sense, they are classic Jonesian style, but they are sinuously shaped, and mostly surrounded by sand, so you don't get the overwhelming perception of an unnatural aircraft carrier deck. The course's greens are mostly at grade

standout par three. Again, there is a huge expanse of sand – with very artistic edges – but this time it is backed by the sea. The short par five seventeenth shares its teeing ground with sixteen, not particularly relevant to riders but another nice touch for walkers. And the home hole is a long four. From the tee, it feels as though it is a diagonal 'bite off as much as you can chew' shot, but actually the hole is pretty straight. There is a central bunker 240 yards from the back tee, with lots of room to the right, though the view is better from the tighter left side. You would, however, have to be pretty brave actually to aim there. A tiny back left plateau on the green gives a scary Sunday pin.

So, that is Costa Palmas, a splendid course with a great variety of holes and a very good addition to the golfing attributes of Los Cabos. It's fair to say that the course needs to be good, given the standard of the rest of the development, but Bobby Jones and his crew have more than lived up to the ground they were given – this is fine work. **GCA**

“The sheer expanse of bare sand toys with visuals and makes club selection difficult”

decision-making. Right is shorter and offers good visibility but sand threatens. Left is the bailout, but a mound makes accessing green harder. This is a good solid strategic hole.

The ninth is a brute: a tough, long four with sand biting in from the left at 295 yards from the back tee. A big sand complex at front right threatens the approach. There is a good view of the

with their surrounds: the long par three fourteenth is one exception to this, using a slight elevation to defend the front of the surface.

The fifteenth, a medium par four, is the first of the marina holes, with a very attractive tee shot. It is strategically clever; the green very clearly accepts shots better from the left side, close to the water. Sixteen is potentially a