



WINTER GETAWAYS

Making a Splash in LOS CABOS

TWIN DOLPHIN AND MONTAGE RESORT ARE INSTANT FAVORITES

By *Travelin' Joe Passov*



Think “dolphin,” and your mind conjures up traits such as “adorable,” “playful” and “clever.” Contemplate two dolphins and you double the fun. Apply the attributes to a golf course and you have

Twin Dolphin GC, the most distinctive new layout in Los Cabos, Mexico. Much like the creatures it depicts, Twin Dolphin is smart, sleek and inspires pure joy.

Friendly and laid-back, the Twin Dolphin course is a perfect match for the legend who co-designed it, Fred Couples. Nearby courses were authored by the Bear, the Shark and a Tiger — pretty fearsome-sounding. This one from the PGA Tour’s King of Chill?

“Playability was the prime consideration,” said Couples. “Twin Dolphin is the kind of course I can enjoy with my 15-handicap pals, as well as my fellow Tour pros. Sure, we could have put a few more teeth in the design, but we wanted a course that’s fun for everyone.”

A STANDOUT DESIGN

Mission accomplished. Opened in November 2018, Twin Dolphin is hardly a pushover, at 7,156 yards, and par 72 from the tips. But with three sets of formal forward tees, three additional sets of combo tees and a set of 2,300-yard, par-61 *niño’s* (kids’) tees, flexibility is a strong suit. While there are several daunting forced carries over desert canyons for the big bashers, plus massive bunkers and vast arroyos dotting the layout, Couples and architect Todd Eckenrode of Origins Golf Design created countless



helpful options, including welcoming kick-slopes and comforting width.

Ideally situated on a high hillside almost midway between San Jose del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas, Twin Dolphin rises and falls over tumbling terrain slashed by desert washes, which provide beauty, peril and strategic challenges. Exotic spiny flora in the form of cacti, trees and shrubs frames every hole. Rock outcrops backdrop many tees and greens. At virtually every turn, you're delighted with panoramic views of the Sea. And it's all natural, with nothing forced.

"We wanted to showcase the natural terrain," says Eckenrode. "We tried to avoid that bulldozed, clean-edged look that so many courses feature. We chose to let the land be the star."

Indeed, the formal (if jagged) edges of the golf course practically melt into the surrounding topography. Lacy-edged bunkers appear as if created by erosion, not by a bulldozer blade. Rather than import colorful exotic shrubs and trees, the architects and landscape team used only plants indigenous to the region. Fairways and green complexes hew so naturally to the existing contours that it feels as if the course was discovered rather than designed.

Still, it definitely was designed, and



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—FRED COUPLES



TWIN DOLPHIN:
AN INSPIRED FRED
COUPLES/TODD
ECKENRODE DESIGN
BACKDROPPED BY
MESMERIZING
OCEAN VIEWS.



skillfully so. Perhaps most admirable is the variety. No single hole resembles another, and there is nice variation in distances, directions and shot demands. Most remarkable, however, is that each is sufficiently attractive and interesting that even if there were no ocean backdrops, the course would be stimulating to play every day. The firm and fast TifGrand Bermuda fairway turf and TifEagle Bermuda greens provide for plenty of run and ground game options into the greens.

Picking standout holes is easy with so many to choose from. Couples claims he "loves par-5s that make or break your round." Surely he must be enamored with

the 6th. At 517 yards, it's easily reachable by Freddie and his pro pals. Thanks to the inspired design, it's also reachable by normal folks. A left-side bunker some 20 yards short of the green will snare anything close to it. Carry it, however, and in classic risk/reward fashion, a broad slope will help transport your ball all the way onto the green.

The 389-yard, par-4 9th tangles with a deep arroyo on the tee shot, followed by an approach to a green framed by massive bluff walls. The 416-yard, par-4 10th is Eckenrode's homage to Alister MacKenzie's 11th at Pasatiempo, with its fairway bisected by a canyon-like hazard.

Eckenrode's favorite hole, certainly for dramatic scenery, is the drop-shot, drop-dead gorgeous par-3 11th, which plunges you into and over an arroyo. Yank it left and a bunker and oblivion await. Miss it right and a friendly side-slope will direct your ball toward the intended target. Holes 14 to 16 yield spectacular ocean vistas, culminating with the 16th and its one-of-a-kind split fairway, divided by a twisting arroyo with a sandy bottom.

If you believe Couples was present just for the ribbon cutting and to cash the check, think again. Freddie has made Twin Dolphin his home away from home. He spends six weeks a year on property and

states that he was more involved on the design side than on any other project he's worked on worldwide.

Freddie is also fond of the Red Door halfway houses/comfort stations located at the 5th and 12th holes. Soft chairs, giant-screen televisions and food and beverage options that range from snackable to full lunch arrive practically as soon as you do. Couples is partial to the cheeseburger sliders, which are delicious. I enjoyed a surprise birthday cake slice, which was so tasty I should have asked for seconds, a thought that popped into my brain after I faded my second into the desert on the 13th.



New and Notable

Los Cabos golf development is hardly slowing down. One new course is open, another is right around the corner, several others offer new avenues of accessibility, and there are more designs on the books. Here's the skinny on what's new.

Opened in late November on Los Cabos' pristine East Cape is **Costa Palmas Golf Club**. Located 45 minutes northeast of the International Airport, this 7,221-yard, Robert Trent Jones II design peers out at the Sea of Cortez and the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains in splendid isolation. The linky layout accompanies the recently launched Four Seasons Resort Los Cabos at Costa Palmas, a beachfront spread with 118 guest rooms and 23 suites. Play is limited to Costa Palmas owners and resort guests.

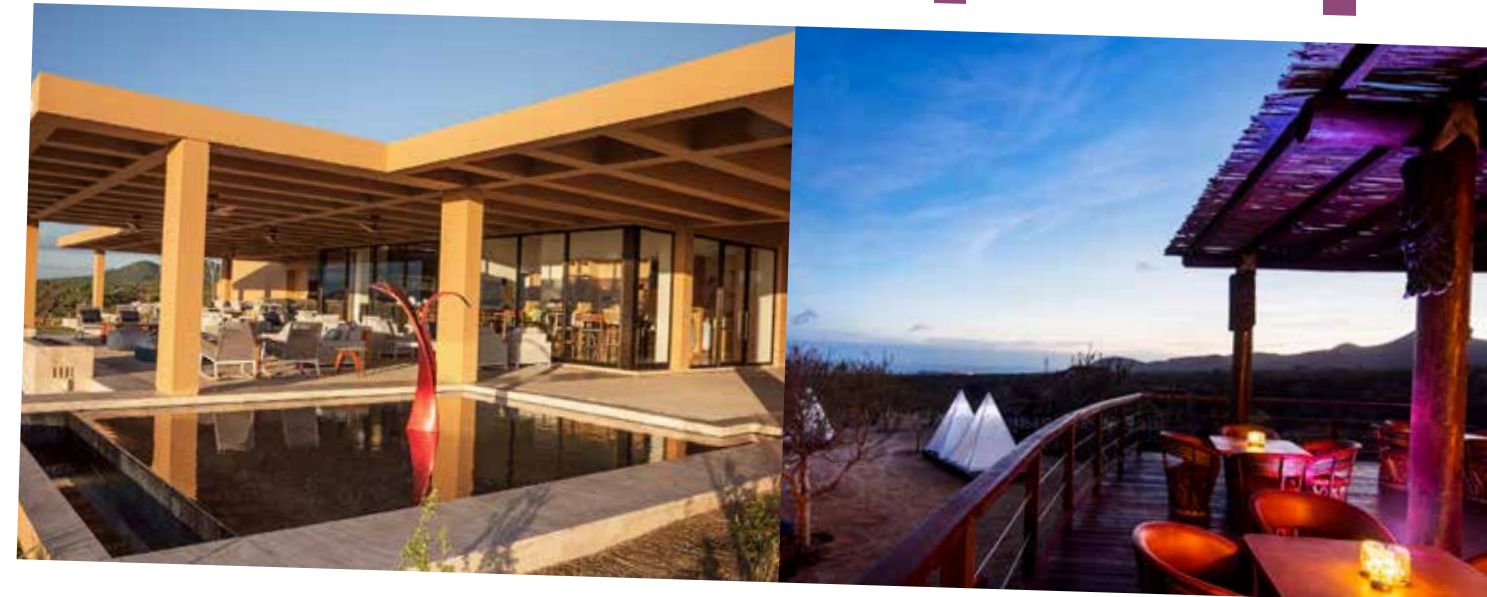
Another newbie making a splash is **Rancho San Lucas**, on the Pacific Ocean side of Cabo. The shark sighting here is courtesy of Greg Norman, who with senior designer Jason McCoy crafted a rollicking, lay-of-the-land journey characterized by glorious ocean panoramas, desert accents and a plethora of ground-game options. The 834-acre community houses the Grand Solmar Resort, two full-ownership real estate properties, the Villas and the Norman Estates, a design center, community park and more. The private membership club offers outside play exclusively to guests of Solmar Hotels & Resorts.

Already prized for its perched-on-the-Pacific location and its award-winning golf courses and community, **Diamante** is now — slightly — more accessible than ever. In the past, the only way to play Mexico's top-ranked course, the Davis Love – designed **Dunes**, or to tackle Tiger Woods' first completed creation, **El Cardonal**, was by spending a week at one of their accommodations options, which include beach estate homes, golf villas and condo-style suites. As of this past summer, however, guests of two superb new hotels built oceanside in the Diamante community, **Nobu** and the **Hard Rock**, have booking privileges.

Cabo's ultimate wow! course is Jack Nicklaus' **Quivira**, high atop the edge of the Pacific. Ranked among the World's 100 Greatest Golf Courses, Quivira features cliff-top holes that straddle rock-encrusted dune ridges which leave you dizzy — and that's just from the cart ride. There was early talk of going completely private, but as Quivira celebrates its fifth birthday (with a special 5th Anniversary Package), it remains available not only to member/owners at Quivira Los Cabos, but also to guests of any of four Pueblo Bonito Resorts in Cabo.



GOLF IN LOS CABOS IS RENOWNED FOR ITS OCEANFRONT HOLES AND DRAMATIC SETTINGS, AS THIS SHOT OF QUIVIRA ATTESTS.



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BEYOND 5-STAR

With all of these niceties, and minimal play, a round at Twin Dolphin is quick, and one to be savored. Access, as with most recent Cabo entries, is limited. The club is private, with membership available to owners of the Montage Residences or Maravilla, both within the Twin Dolphin community, master planned and developed by Ohana Real Estate Investors. Several tee times each morning and each afternoon are also made available to guests of the Montage Los Cabos, the first international Montage resort property.

In short order, Montage has acquired a devoted following in the U.S., and it's rapidly extending to Mexico. The 122-room hotel enjoys an enviable location, overlooking Santa Maria Bay, and possesses one of Cabo's best (and only) swimmable beaches. The room amenities and property attractions, including one of Los Cabos' largest spas, are five-star, but the service levels burst the five-star ceiling to whatever is next. Truly memorable is beachside dining at Marea; try the grilled, freshly caught shrimp tacos and a frosty cerveza. Follow that

with dinner at Mezcal, which serves up sea views and innovative fare that celebrates Mexican heritage with a blend of modern and historic influences.

The 52 Montage Residences come in two- and three-bedroom flavors and feature ocean views and every modern convenience. Next door is Maravilla Los Cabos, a private residential community and club on 260 acres, which steps up the luxury component another notch. Ocean-view villas, townhomes, custom homes and homesites are available for those who have achieved the most and who demand the best. Lunch at the Santa Maria Beach Club and dinner at Ecco will spoil you for anything that comes after.

Twin Dolphin Los Cabos takes its name from a renowned luxury hotel that once occupied the site. Nostalgia notwithstanding, what replaced it is significantly better. From the golf to the Montage resort hotel and residences to the remarkable Maravilla development, the new Twin Dolphin community has raised the bar in Los Cabos. "I feel really good about what we've done with Twin Dolphin," says Couples. If it weren't for his bad back, I'd tell him to take a bow. ■

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