

GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

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in Los Cabos, Mexico

*Photographed by:
Evan Schiller*

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Natural selection

TWIN DOLPHIN GOLF CLUB, LOS CABOS, MEXICO

Golf course architect Todd Eckenrode's naturalistic approach has paid dividends for the new Twin Dolphin layout, as Adam Lawrence reports

Los Cabos, on the southern tip of Mexico's Baja California, has been a popular tourist destination for Americans for many years. Initially a mainstream destination – popular for spring break trippers, with many resorts aimed at that market – Cabo became of interest to golfers when the Ocean course at Cabo del Sol, one of the Nicklaus company's most successful designs, opened in 1994.

Further golf followed, but it's in the last ten years that the twenty miles of coast between the towns of San Jose del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas has truly become a golfing hotbed, with the opening of Tom Fazio's Chileno Bay and Nicklaus's Quivira, and the Diamante community (both actually

to the west of San Jose del Cabo) with its dramatic Dunes course by Paul Cowley and Davis Love III's firm, and El Cardonal, the first Tiger Woods course to make it to opening day (designed, as has been all of Tiger's work so far, principally by architect Beau Welling).

What the area has also seen over the last few years is a definite shift upmarket. Those spring breakers are still there, but with the new golf courses all incorporating expensive real estate or resort components (or both), the Cabo scene is definitely changing. And the latest new development to hit the market, the Twin Dolphin golf course and its associated facilities, located between

Photo: Evan Schiller Photography



The par-three eleventh at Todd Eckenrode's new Twin Dolphin layout





Eckenrode (left) on site with Fred Couples, the signature designer for the project

Chileno Bay and Cabo del Sol, is for sure the most upmarket yet.

The facilities at the development are already extremely impressive. There is a 120-room, five-star Montage hotel, located down by the water's edge at the south-eastern corner of the property, while there are two separate housing offerings, though these are not yet fully built. The 52 Montage Residences are, though part of the hotel complex, actually for sale, while the Maravilla community, occupying the south-west part of the site, includes villas, homesites and townhouses. They are extremely high end too, with villa prices starting at several million dollars. Only homeowners in one of the two communities will be able to join the golf club, while the hotel also has access to tee times.

The golf course itself is set slightly inland, above the highway that connects the two towns. This is unlike, for example, Diamante, where the Dunes course occupies prime

oceanfront land, but I don't think it is that much of a compromise. The land is dramatic, basically a desert hillside, but cut through by many dry river beds (arroyos). The ground rolls in all directions, and is frankly a golf architect's dream.

The architect of the Twin Dolphin course, southern California-based Todd Eckenrode of Origins Golf Design, was paired with PGA Tour star Fred Couples as signature designer on the project. Eckenrode says he enjoyed collaborating with Couples, who has done a variety of signature projects with other architects, and that his involvement was pretty active – on several occasions as we toured the course, he says things like 'We had a bunker there, but took it out at Freddie's suggestion', and flags up his involvement with the second green, where an initial, roughed in concept, was blown up and reshaped to be wider, to make the hole more playable.

Eckenrode identifies as a naturalist in design terms, and that, to me, was

the most immediately striking aspect of the golf course. Although a fair amount of earth was moved during construction – and the whole course was sandcapped, as the desert soils do not drain very well – it takes an experienced eye to see where. There are, for example, very few drainage basins, with Eckenrode preferring to use the cant of the land to surface-drain the course into the arroyos which flank most holes. Although the course is new, it already looks very mature, thanks to an enormous revegetation scheme managed by landscape architect Ken Alperstein of Pinnacle Design (see box). This has been a triumph. Trees and plants that were removed to build the golf course have been replanted in a brilliant scheme, and there is absolutely no non-native vegetation to be found anywhere on the golf course. The course is still a few years away from true maturity; but considering how good it looks now, I'd sure like to see it when it has achieved his goals.

Salvage operation

Preserving native trees, shrubs and cacti on the Twin Dolphin site

Photo: Evan Schiller Photography



The naturalistic feel of Twin Dolphin is down to two principal aspects: the shaping for surface drainage and the management of vegetation. For the latter, the development team called on California-based landscape architect Ken Alperstein, president of Pinnacle Design. Alperstein says that when he first saw the site, he was excited to get another project that was covered with such amazing flora, so that he and his team could take advantage of reusing that same vegetation along the edges of the new golf holes. Knowing that a design concept is only a concept without the proper implementation, Alperstein swiftly stressed to the client the importance of, prior to grading the fairways, hiring a very competent landscape company to salvage all the healthy trees, large shrubs and cacti within the proposed limits of the grading disturbance.

The developer agreed, so Pinnacle began the task of walking down the centrelines of each proposed golf hole and tagging trees, shrubs, and cacti that were healthy and high in aesthetic value. The clearing operation was performed using a three-step process. First, they cleared and salvaged plants 50 feet on each side of the centreline of the golf hole. Second, Pinnacle walked the hole with Eckenrode and set the limits of disturbance and the contractor did a second pass of salvaging

and clearing staying inside that limit by 20-30 feet so that final clearing can be made when the shapers were making their final tie-ins to the natural grade. As the golf hole edges were being tied-in, the final step of salvaging and clearing occurred, with additional walkthroughs and direction by the designers, removing all unwanted vegetation needed to create the necessary play space for golf as well saving key plant material to remain in place because the plants accented golf but did not hinder playability.

Once the landscape teams were two or three holes ahead of the shaping operation, they were able to go to future golf holes and directly relocate the tagged plant material to the revegetation areas on the finish shaped golf holes.

The same 20 native species were used everywhere. Alperstein said: "As we spotted these plants along the golf holes, it was important to look at the existing flora along the preserved edges and try to match the plant varieties and densities. Each planting area had its own micro-environment – different elevations, sun angles, wind factors, all affecting minimum and maximum temperatures – so it was imperative to pay attention to what nature next door was telling us, because what works in one area, might not work in another."



The course is dramatic from the starting hole, a big par five that plays from a high tee across a deep arroyo and then sweeps uphill and left to a green tucked on the edge of the corridor. It's an intensely strategic hole, bunkered extensively up the left, low side, the inside of the dogleg, and not at all on the other. This is a theme that repeats itself throughout the course; the short route to the hole is protected by hazards, but there is ample width to bail out, and no sand on the wide side to harm you. I generally find myself looking at holes with bunkers on the outside of the dogleg and thinking 'What is that doing here? You're already out of position', so I congratulate Eckenrode on his commitment to making his bunkers strategic.

The third is a delight, a downhill par four which uses a natural valley that chokes down to a very narrow slot about 300 yards off the back tee. Big hitters might be best placed to club down here. But the hole then opens out again, and the green is set in a large area of short

grass, with plenty of room to miss and plenty of short game interest if you do.

Eckenrode's greens are pretty complex without, mostly, going to the extremes. One hole that pushes against normal boundaries is the par-three eighth (pictured on the cover of this issue), whose green, set up on a ledge, sheds balls to both front and back. The happy medium is small, but the challenge and ridgetop nature set it apart from the other par threes. They generally are a fine set, with the eleventh playing sharply downhill, and the long fourteenth reminiscent of a number of Bill Coore/Ben Crenshaw long threes, such as the fifteenth at We-Ko-Pa in Arizona or the twelfth at Bandon Trails – a hole with lots of trouble on the direct line to the flag, but plenty of space out to the side, enabling the player to bounce the ball in. This ground-focused approach is a theme throughout the course; greens are open and there are many helping slopes. Eckenrode says: "After the tenth, every hole on the back nine has slopes that help golfers

bounce the ball in. I think it's mostly a function of the land and routing, but it's probably one of the reasons I think the back nine is so much fun."

Twin Dolphin was built by Eckenrode in collaboration with a high-class group of shapers, including Jonathan Reissetter, Kye Goalby, Blake Conant, Clyde Johnson and Cliff Hamilton. I have to say that I thought it was a delight. The combination of naturalness with a terrific routing – that must have been very difficult to find, given the nature of the site and its pre-existing vegetation – truly make for a course that is a joy to play. Eckenrode himself said, in publicity material, that he thought they might have built the best course in Cabo; this is high praise, as (just to pick one) Diamante Dunes has been as high as 36th in *Golf* magazine's list of the world's best. I have not seen enough of Cabo to comment, but I will say that anyone who values naturalism in golf will have to go a long way to find better work than this. **GCA**