

Fore! Golf Courses Take Aim at Central Pacific

By Nicolas Ruggia

Tico Times Staff

Good news for golfers: In the next couple of years, several high-end golf courses will be moving into the country's central Pacific coast.

"There is no reason Costa Rica can't be a golf destination. It just needs golf courses," said Aaron Dowd Jr., managing partner of the planned Cabo Caletas Ocean and Golf Club in Esterillos, about 20 minutes south of the booming beach town of Jacó.

The attractive elements of the Central Pacific for golf developers are lack of development combined with existing deforested cattle farms that are surrounded by breathtaking natural wonders, prompting angling to combine the links with the sticks.

"The good thing about (our) course is that it is right in the middle of the canopy," said José Quesada, golf director at the Los Sueños Marriott Ocean and Golf Resort's La Iguana course in Playa Herradura, just north of Jacó. "We're trying to plant more trees for the scarlet macaws. We're trying to be very eco-friendly."

La Iguana (golflaiguana.com), currently the only golf course in the area, boasts an 18-hole championship course open to the public. It isn't just your average course, either.

"We were nominated in Travel + Leisure Magazine as one of the best operators in the world," Quesada said. "Los Sueños was on their list of 20."

The course opens at 6 a.m., and the pro shop closes at 5 p.m.

The business also tries to reach out to the local community, offering clinics and lower

course rates to Costa Ricans. The clinics cost \$150 per month and come with nine free holes of golf.

"We have a ladies' clinic on Mondays, teenagers on Thursdays and men on Fridays," Quesada said. "We also have a handicapped program. We do a free clinic once a month for ... blind people, people with no arm, no leg ... called Challenge Golf."

A morning game costs \$125 for hotel guests, \$155 for the general public, \$140 for a condo owner or \$85 for Ticos. At noon, the rates drop to \$110, \$130, \$110 and \$65 respectively. After 4 p.m., entrance costs \$50.

Annual passes are available for \$3,000 per person or \$5,000 per family. A joining fee of \$2,000 also applies.

Planning to join Los Sueños in two to two and a half years is the Del Pacifico links-style development in Esterillos (www.delpacifico.net).

"We've got the course routed," said Barry Strudwick, co-founder of Del Pacifico with partner William Ramírez. "It's going to be a private course ... open only to owners and residents of Del Pacifico."

The 700-acre hotel development - 350 acres on either side of the highway through Esterillos - will be a 1,300-unit community for active men and women, featuring horse stables, a shooting range, jungle and sport-fishing activities in addition to the fairways. Membership is automatic for owners of condos, which range in price from \$275,000 to \$550,000, and houses, priced between \$850,000 and \$2 million.

"It will be exciting resort golf," Strudwick said. "Our view is Del Pacifico is oriented to creating a lifestyle experience for the outdoorsman. Our market is kind of the pre-retirement baby boomer."

The course will offer both sand and forest environment.

"It will play five mountain holes through the rain forest," Strudwick said. "Then it will have two holes that play to the beach, and 11 holes on the beach."

In addition to the golf, the massive community will have a town center with 38 stores, ranging from banks and car rental agencies to women's apparel shops and an art gallery. There will also be three restaurants in the community, joined by a five-star boutique hotel on the beach.

"We are building a resort town, not a gated Gringo community," Strudwick said.

Strudwick's course rests on three former cattle farms, and he is in the process of reforesting the areas that will not be used for the greens.

For those not looking for a condo, you can



Photo courtesy of Los Sueños Marriott Ocean and Golf Resort

play another planned course in Esterillos, the aforementioned Cabo Caletas (cabocaletas.com), owned by Dowd and his father, Aaron Sr., and scheduled for a mid-2010 opening.

"We've got 450 acres of oceanfront property," Dowd said. "It's got beautiful rolling hills, the beach has volcanic tidal pools, and we have a national park (nearby). You see monkeys."

"It's an eco-golf kind of style. If you come out here, you have more of a Costa Rican experience. I think it will be one of the finest courses in Costa Rica and likely Latin America."

The Cabo Caletas property also used to be a cattle ranch, and, like Strudwick, the Dowds are planting on their property as well. The rolling hills allowed for creative thinking for the water drainage systems: Water from the courses has been irrigated

to collect in the low points.

"We have a full-time forestry guy and we've already planted about 3,000 trees," Dowd said. "We're basically creating lakes. We're not tapping into the aquifer. We're not using streetlamps. We're using low landscape lighting because we have a lot of shorebirds and a local turtle habitat."

The eco-approach makes sense to Dowd on several levels.

"(It makes sense to do this) so people can't bitch about it later," Dowd said. "But seriously, it's the right way to do it. I'm not a tree hugger, but I do love nature. We're not looking at this just to turn a buck. This is a big project."

And why waste such a beautiful property?

"Our property reminds a lot of people of 'Jurassic Park,'" Dowd said. "We try to keep the velociraptors out, though." ■



Courtesy of Del Pacifico

Golf Living: Above right, aerial view of La Iguana Golf Course and Los Sueños Marriott Ocean and Golf Resort in Playa Herradura. Above, houses at Esterillos' links-inclusive Del Pacifico development will be priced from \$850,000 to \$2 million.

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