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YOUR WEEKLY NEWS ON THE GOLD COAST

Guanacaste, Costa Rica

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Friday, April 11, 2008

## Central Pacific Courses Target Golf Tourism

By Leland Baxter-Neal

Three new golf courses are being planned for the Central Pacific, two of which are nearly ready to begin construction and represent more than \$20 million in investment, say developers.

If completed, they would bring the total number of courses in the region to four, including the La Iguana Golf Course at the Los Sueños Marriot Ocean & Golf Resort. Another four courses have been built along the northern Pacific coast in Guanacaste, and at least four more are planned for that same region.

"Certainly, Costa Rica is an up-and-comer," said Rick Summers, the CEO of the Publications and Marketing Group of the Professional Golfers Association, or more simply, the PGA Magazine. "But right now there are many, many very strong destinations that obviously have a head start on Costa Rica."

In the United States, the nation that sends the most tourists to Costa Rica, golf has become an industry worth more than \$75 billion, according to a World Golf Foundation study released in January. Of that, \$18 billion is from golf travel.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, countries like the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Jamaica have established themselves as international golfing locations, Mr Summers said.

"The good news about three new places (in Costa Rica) will be three new influential voices that say golf is important not only to drive tourism dollars, but equally important to drive economic benefits from jobs," said Mr Summers in a telephone interview from the United States this week, emphasizing the importance of government promotion of golf.

While the country has yet to stake out a secure claim, three courses in particular — the Garra de Leon Golf Club, Cabo Velas; the Hacienda Pinilla course, south of Tamarindo, and the Four Seasons Golf Club Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo, all in Guanacaste — have begun to make a name for themselves internationally.

Aaron Dowd Jr., who is developing one of the three golf courses coming to the Central Pacific along with his father, Aaron Dowd Sr., says he believes his project will join those ranks.

His development, called Cabo Caletas Ocean and Golf Club, will cover 450 acres of property in the area of Esterillos Oeste, about 15 minutes south of Jacó.

Included in the project will be a 150 to 200-room hotel, hundreds of condominiums and 130 homes surrounding the centerpiece, oceanfront golf course.

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"It's going to be a golf course that we believe will get Costa Rica noticed as a golfing destination," Mr Dowd said.

Covering 130 acres of his development, the course will be 7200 yards long, feature five holes with ocean views and cost \$11 million. Residents who buy property in the development will receive memberships to the course, and additional memberships will be available, at least initially, to the general public.

Mr Dowd said he has built approximately five golf communities in Florida, and the Esterillos course will be designed by professional golfer Mark McCumbers' company McCumber Golf.

"What we liked about them is that they really use the natural characteristics of the property to blend the golf course into its surroundings so the impact is minimal," Mr Dowd said.

He added that the course will use paspalum grass, which requires 50 per cent less fertilizer and 40 per cent less water. Meanwhile, a property-wide system of drains and canals will collect rainwater and treated wastewater into lakes, which will then be cycled through the course's irrigation system.

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Construction on the course is set to begin later this year, he said, and is expected to open "mid-2010." While it has been permitted, Cabo Caletas was recently among a dozen developments subject to surprise inspections by the Environmental Tribunal, an office of the Ministry of the Environment and Energy (MINAE).

The Tribunal reported only that it "observed the obstruction of a creek that apparently feeds a wetland" during the inspection, and a report from the office is to be reviewed Monday.

Mr Dowd, however, said the creek referred to is normally dry during the dry season, and builders had already installed a temporary culvert — to be replaced in the coming months by a permanent one — that was blocked by some fallen clay the day of the inspection.

A second golf course is being planned just minutes away in Esterillos Este, called Del Pacific in Esterillos. Like Cabo Caletas, the project is also part of a larger real estate development, however the course will be limited only to residents of Del Pacifico.

"We feel that it's an amenity that our owners wanted," said Barry Strudwick, founder of the project, in a telephone interview from the United States.

The 700-acre development will have a five-star hotel, three restaurants, 300 houses and 1200 condominium units, in addition to a "town center" with 25,000 square feet of commercial space. About

100 houses and condominiums are already under construction, and the project, which Mr Strudwick says will total \$1 billion in investment over 10 years, has already generated \$25 million in sales.

"We're actually creating a town, not just a development," Mr Strudwick said.

The course, which will cost \$10 million, is being designed by Delaware architect Allen Liddicoat, with consultation by Billy Casper Golf. The links-style course will extend 6800 yards and play down to the ocean, Mr Strudwick added.

"It will be at a challenging resort-level golf," he said. "Fun, but not frustrating."

The developer said his company is targeting "affluent, pre-retirement baby-boomers, with an active lifestyle."

"Typically when a family visits they'll go do a zip line in the canopy one day, they go to Manuel Antonio the next, they might go fishing or surfing a third day. The father who is along for the eco-vacation that mom planned is ready to play golf the fourth day," he said.

The third golf course to come to the region is much earlier in the planning stages, and is part of a 988-acre project called Garabu, located between Jacó and Herradura. The development would feature two hotels of at least five stars, a business center, an amphitheater, seven nine-story condo towers and a golf course. The first phase of the project, which represents about ten per cent of the total planned development, will cost \$88 million, said a spokesman for the company this week.

The developers, however, said it was too early to give further details about either the project or the golf course.

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