

With Royal Isabela and the revamped Dorado Beach open for play, the island has joined the Caribbean's top golf destinations

BY JEFF WILLIAMS

# PUERTO RICO RISING



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The 12th and 14th holes of Royal Isabela hover above the Atlantic Ocean on the northwest corner of Puerto Rico, and meet at a dramatic double green. Opposite: La Casa is the dining and central meeting place of the small inn of 20 casitas.





Dorado Beach's East Course has been renovated with the "Z" hole, the par-5 fourth, retaining its original layout.

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ore than two decades ago, Charlie Pasarell climbed into a helicopter with two friends to explore the coastline of his native Puerto Rico. Pasarell, a successful professional tennis player, tennis promoter and businessman, wasn't looking for tennis

courts. He was looking for a golf course, the one he had in his dreams.

About 70 miles west of San Juan on the northwest corner of the island near the town of Isabela, he saw below him an expanse of dramatic cliffs book-ended by beaches that were rumpled with dunes. He just had to take a look, up close and personal.

The helicopter landed in a field and Pasarell walked around, a bit awestruck about a landscape that he knew little about in his own country. "We saw these cliffs here in Isabela and said let's put down here," says Pasarell. "I thought this was really some place to build a golf course."

Twenty years later, he did.

Charlie Pasarell, along with his brother Stan, brought Royal Isabela to life in 2010. The 18-hole golf course, and a small inn of 20 casitas that opened in 2012, is the newest gleaming jewel in the tiara of Puerto Rican golf.

Taken along with the reinvention of the iconic Dorado Beach resort that reopened as the plush Ritz-Carlton Reserve in December, and the St. Regis Bahia Beach resort that opened in 2010, Puerto Rico is establishing itself as an exhilarating international golf destination. It's a country that has always had a fine golf pedigree, but now one that contends strongly for best in show in the Caribbean.

"We want Puerto Rico once and for all to get the reputation as a great, world-class golf destination," says Charlie Pasarell. "Dorado had that sort of reputation and will have it again. Royal Isabela will have it, too. From the beginning we wanted a world-class course."

Dorado Beach, founded in 1958 as a RockResort by Laurance Rockefeller, was long the symbol of casual resort elegance in Puerto Rico and the island's beacon for golf. The four Robert Trent Jones golf courses were top-notch, with the East Course at Dorado the finest course in the Caribbean until it was challenged by Pete Dye's Teeth of the Dog at Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic. Puerto Rico had other courses of note, and, unlike the whole of the Caribbean, a significant golfing population.

Puerto Rico's golf glow dimmed when Hyatt, which had operated the Dorado property long after RockResorts had sold it, pulled out. Now, the light is back on island wide, and brighter than ever. The St. Regis Bahia Beach was the first step, Royal Isabela the second and now the Ritz-Carlton Reserve, a partnership of the Caribbean Property Group in New York and the local family-owned Stubbe Organization, completes the Triple Crown.

Standing on the double green of the 12th and 14th holes at Royal Isabela, it's easy to imagine Charlie Pasarell's sense of wonder that day in 1989, and to sense his passion to build his dream golf course here. It took him years to assemble more than 40 parcels of land with various partners, and the whole project, known as Costa Isabela, is comprised of nearly 2,000 acres. The golf course, at 426 acres, sprawls across its landscape, first headed inland over some dynamic terrain, then making its way north to the cliffs.

Pasarell was a top tennis player as a junior and as a professional, winning the U.S. National Indoors title twice in the 1960s and reaching the No. 1 ranking among American players. After his career ended, he became a tennis promoter and commentator, and a businessman involved in resort developments in California that had tennis facilities. But these developments also had golf, and Pasarell became enamored with the game. So, too, did his tennis-playing brother Stan.

When Stan, himself a successful businessman, became involved in his brother's project in the mid '90s, they spent days walking the property



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looking for golf holes, often carrying clubs and balls to launch shots down imaginary fairways and at imaginary greens. This would not just be a course they owned. It would be their creation.

"We would hit shots and walk them off, hit more and try to find holes, and we'd argue about which way a hole should play or where the green should be," says Charlie. "But we were always on the same page as to the quality of the course we wanted to build."

"If we were going to do this, then it would have to be first-class, and we knew we had the land and the means to do it," says Stan.

The brothers had very specific ideas for a course, but they weren't architects. They needed someone who knew how to build a course and someone who could tell them what they could do, and what they couldn't. Charlie had come to know an associate of Pete Dye, David Pfaff, through his resort development dealings in California. Pfaff had worked on the Teeth of the Dog.

"It's a remarkable piece of property these guys have put together," says Pfaff.

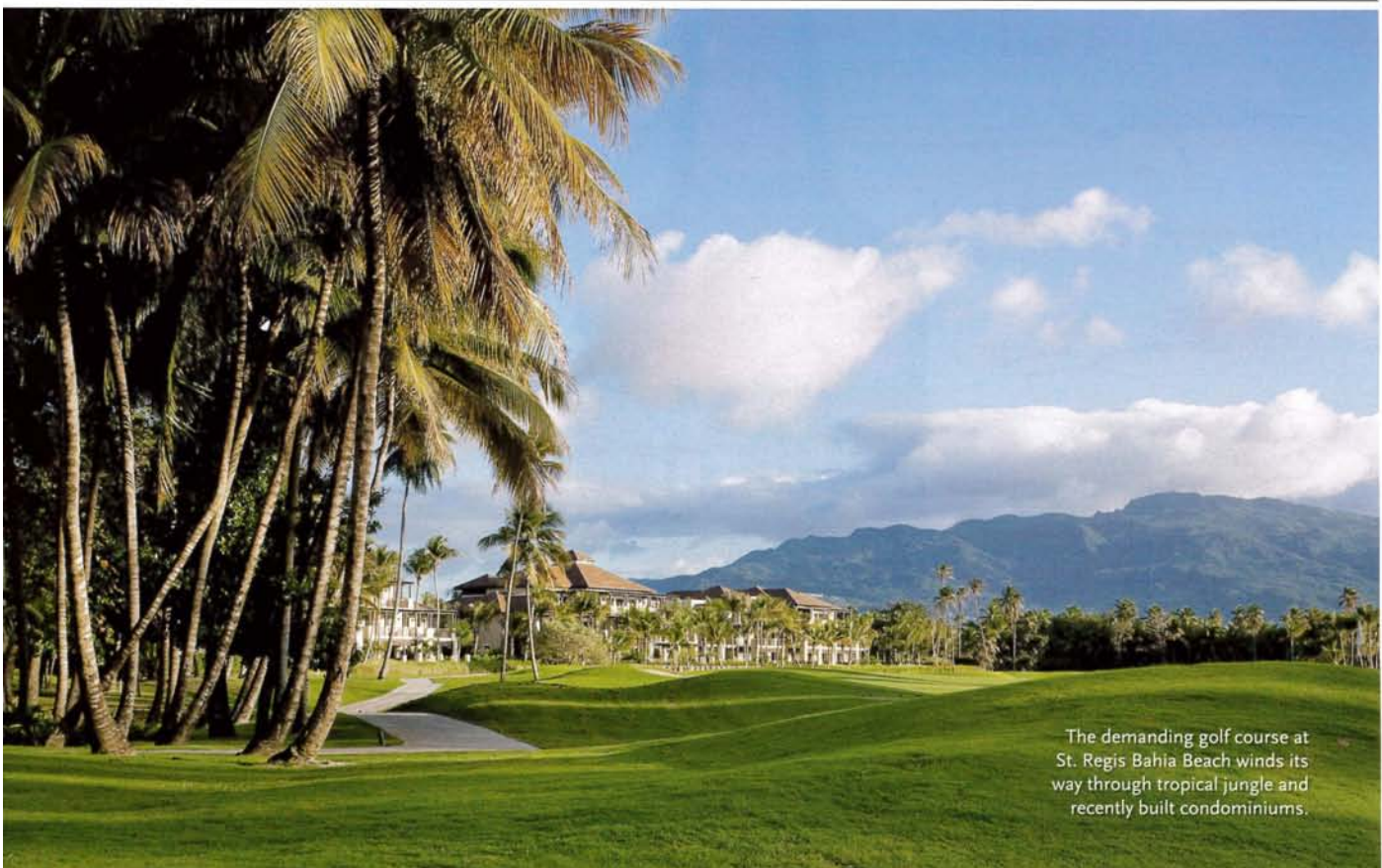
What Pfaff has rendered of the Pasarells' dreams is a front nine played through heaving land forms that play away from the ocean, then an

intriguing journey to the cliffs above the churning Atlantic where five of the back nine holes play, culminating in the course's most dramatic offering, the Hail Mary par 3 17th. Playing over a gorge to a pinky finger of land with a green that seems hardly larger than a pool table, you either hit it or pay the consequences. A good score at Isabela will often depend on a player's fate at this hole, but you get some breathtaking views to assuage the loss of your second or third balls.

"Everybody agreed that was a hole that had to be built," says Charlie. "The first time we saw it, we knew it was going to be part of our course. It's a scary hole, but it's a really memorable one."

At the end of this breathtaking run of holes is La Casa, the main dining, drinking and gathering spot where a few cold cervezas are in order at the open-air bar after a round. Each of the casitas at the resort is a spacious private retreat built with soothing tropical woods, outfitted in comfortable fabrics and accented by individual plunge pools on the deck that have views of the Atlantic.

It's open to the public now, but Royal Isabela is meant to be a private club. "We thought all along that this course would be our private club," says Stan. "We have sold about 35 memberships and there are 29 home



The demanding golf course at St. Regis Bahia Beach winds its way through tropical jungle and recently built condominiums.



sites and we have sold four of them. We have tried to make this very attractive to the person who would like to be a club member, and perhaps some of those persons would also like to become investors here as well."

If the Pasarells can make the business plan work, there might be up to five golf courses here, which in the future would include one of the most special nine-hole stretches in the world. Stan is more than happy to chauffeur a visitor to a beachfront site, hard against the Atlantic, where he shows you the holes that play along the beach and through the meadows. "You see this par 5 here, don't you?" he gestures from the wheel of his SUV. And you surely do, with its green site ending at the beach. "Here we have a par 4 and a par 3 in the dunes. Don't you think they will be great?" The only answer is yes.

"We want to develop hotels, casinos, more public golf facilities and low density housing," says Charlie. "Royal Isabela is intended to attract the very high-end market. The other development here will be more public, you could say. We have a long way to go, and this will be our lifetime work here. You know, we are also following in the footsteps of Mr. Rockefeller at Dorado. The new Ritz at Dorado is a great thing for Puerto Rico."

Rockefeller's footsteps at Dorado Beach left an indelible impression for several decades. Elizabeth Taylor and President Dwight D. Eisenhower were among the headliner guests. The hotel attracted a devoted golf following that was charmed and challenged by what Trent Jones had wrought.

Now the old hotel is gone, replaced in almost the same configuration by the Ritz-Carlton Reserve. It's a collection of two-story hotel buildings (just as Rockefeller had done) along with condominiums and private villas. Marble, limestone, wood, lush fabrics and original art and sculpture define the \$342 million renaissance of this legendary resort.

"We spent a whole lot of time trying to figure out how not to screw this up," says Michael Lefkowitz, a principal in the Caribbean Property Group. "Our CEO Mark Lipschutz, his father Herb owned the Madison Deli in New York and went to Dorado Beach every year. Barry Breeman, a partner, Mark and I all have a love affair with Dorado Beach."

When the Pritzker family behind Hyatt wanted to sell the Dorado Beach property, CPG was more than happy to step in along with the Stubbe Organization of Puerto Rico that had developed a lot of Dorado East. The timing couldn't have been worse, but CPG and Stubbe couldn't have been more determined.

"We were closing the deal in December of 2007, just when the world started falling apart financially," says Lefkowitz. "They expected us to back out, or renegotiate, but we went through with the deal exactly as we said we would."

"Looking at Dorado Beach, we viewed it as we aren't the smartest people in the world, but Laurance Rockefeller had the chance to buy any piece of property he wanted to in Puerto Rico and he chose Dorado Beach. There is no more perfect canvas to paint your vision on than Dorado."

Out of this deal will come Puerto Rico's most opulent resort. With



Clockwise from top left: The pool at the St. Regis Bahia Beach has views of the ocean. The veranda in the Governor's Suite overlooks the tropical setting. The golf course at Bahia Beach has plenty of water and deep bunkers.

nightly rates starting at around \$1,600, CPG is banking on the Ritz reputation for quality and Dorado's rich history of attracting the well-heeled from both near and far. To fulfill the vision inspired by Rockefeller, CPG brought in SB Architects, a firm that has designed several iconic properties worldwide, and widely known landscape architect Bill Bensley. The only original structure that remains is Su Casa, once the home of an heiress, that has been remodeled into a four-bedroom hacienda that will rent for a cool \$30,000 a night. Renowned Spanish chef José Andrés will oversee the dining at Mi Casa.

"The question we keep asking ourselves is how do we bring the dream of Dorado Beach back to life," says Lefkowitz. "We have honored [Rockefeller's] legacy. He wouldn't build anything taller than the palm trees, and we aren't either. We are putting our buildings on the same footprints his were on. We have brought in a team of architects and designers who are second to none. We are standing on the shoulders of a giant."

Honoring the tradition of the resort's golf courses (which include the two at the old Cerromar Beach property), CPG brought in Robert Trent Jones Jr. to oversee the refurbishment and updating of Dorado's East Course, a lovely layout that always defined the tropical splendor of the game. The par 5 fourth hole, the "Z Hole," is a double-dogleg beauty that zigzags out to the ocean and lives in the memory from the first time you play it.

"Dorado Beach has been the flagship of Puerto Rican golf," says Jones Jr. "My job was to polish the diamond that was my father's work. I did



# SAN JUAN'S GOOD LIFE

As the Puerto Rican golf scene blossoms with an allure that beckons players to the nation's resort countryside, the bustling city of San Juan offers its own temptations with a percolating culinary scene, nightlife, arts and crafts and historic wanderings.

It's quite easy to base yourself in San Juan and day-trip to most of Puerto Rico's best golf destinations. Dorado Beach is only 45 minutes to the west and the arc of resorts on the northeast corner of the island is no more than an hour and small change away. An ideal vacation would be a few days in the countryside playing golf, and a weekend in San Juan.

A lot is happening in the Condado area of San Juan with the much anticipated reopening of the Condado Vanderbilt Hotel. Once an iconic hotel of the city, it fell on hard times and was shut two decades ago. As of the latter part of 2012, the spectacular lobby lounge area with its two bars, Fumidor, its cigar room, and the 1919 Restaurant had reopened. The rooms are expected to open in early 2013.

The magnificent public areas are designed by Jorge Rosselló, who also designed the La Concha resort down the street. There is plush formal splendor to the place harkening back to its grand old days, and shorts and flip-flops don't seem to be quite at home here. If you dress up (and many Puerto Ricans do), you will be part of the artwork. Puerto Rican native Juan Jose Cuevas, who has cooked with Alain Ducasse in New York, heads up the kitchen.

A three-minute walk and a whole different atmosphere away from the Vanderbilt is the newly opened O:live Boutique Hotel, owned by a young couple—Fernando Davila and Loisse Herger—who have taken their design cues from the European small-but-classy genre. The 15

rooms are well-furnished and amenitized, the little restaurant turns out palate tingling internationally inspired food, and the rooftop bar lounge, affording a lovely view of Laguna Condado, is a jumping place with two hot tubs, tapas and plenty of rum and cervezas.

The Santurce area of the city is humming with gastronomic adventure. And where else are you able to peruse a city's principal art museum

restaurants and bars, places where there is often free entertainment. New on the block is Santaella, the creation of chef Jose Santaella who has cooked with Eric Ripert at Le Bernadin in New York and Gary Danko at The Dining Room in San Francisco. Santaella sources much of what he serves right across the street, blending local ingredients in a fusion of international style in a very hip environment. And you must have the watermelon mojito.

For French-inspired cuisine, try Augusto's in the Miramar Courtyard Marriott. Chef Ariel



The main dining room at the restaurant Laurel, located in San Juan's principal art museum, where the decor is art themed.

then sit down to some fine dining in the same facility. That's where Laurel is, the restaurant owned by the very expressive Mario Pagán, once a contestant on "The Next Iron Chef." He describes Laurel as a kitchen/art bar, and there is plenty of art for the eye and plenty of it for the palate. You can get shrimp brûlée with plantain crust and veal brains en croustade with dark butter here. Artsy enough for you?

Not far away in Santurce is the market area, Plaza del Mercado, where local vendors ply the substantial food wares of the country. Surrounding "La Placita" are a number of

Rodríguez is continuing a tradition of serving classical French with Puerto Rican twists. Sommelier Marcos Mercado seems to belong in Paris, but fortunately he's recommending and pouring wines at this surprising little place.

There's always the redone Patio del Nispero at the lovely El Convento Hotel in Old San Juan, and not too far away the trendy restaurant Marmalade.

After you have played your 72 holes for the week, there are a bunch of 19th holes in San Juan that invite you to keep on playing.

—Jeff Williams

everything I could to put my mind into his mentality there. The East Course is his work at the height of his career. Dorado is a straightforward lovely golf course.

"We lengthened it as he would have done himself. We removed trees to open up the views. We removed a lot of vegetation. We put in better drainage. There are some new bunkers and shapes. His bunkers were up in the air for better drainage in that situation where you are at sea level. We restored some of those that had been knocked down and went back to the original elevations. I believe the course is now what he would have wanted in the 21st Century."

Bob Jr. had come to Puerto Rico a few years earlier when he was recruited to reimagine a golf course 45 minutes east of San Juan that had been at the center of a failed development. This would become the St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort and Golf Club that opened in 2010. It was the first new resort in Puerto Rico in more than a decade, and a luxury one at that. It signaled a rebirth of hope in the country, which had taken a pretty hard hit from the global economic turnaround.

The old course at Bahia Beach was a decent layout with a splendid three-hole finish right along the beach. For years it was kept on life-support, in lousy condition but in a prime location. It was a diamond in the Bermuda rough.





The new entry pavilion at the Ritz-Carlton Reserve at Dorado Beach. One of the private pools at the hotel, which reopened in December 2012.



"Bahia Beach was pretty much a blowup," said Jones Jr. "But it was a great piece of property to work with. We had to do some rerouting to make the real estate plan work there, but the course had some really good bones, and we were able to achieve something, I think. Of course the finish along the beach is pretty special. It isn't often these days you get to work with as much beachfront property."

Bahia Beach sits cheek-by-jowl next to Coco Beach, a resort and residential complex with 36 holes branded under the Trump International label and designed by PGA Tour player Tom Kite. Coco Beach is home to a PGA Tour event, the Puerto Rican Open. Sweeping farther east and down to the south, there are two courses at the Rio Mar resort, a lovely course at the El Conquistador and two courses at the Palmas Del Mar resort. All of the courses are within 45 minutes of each other.

Seth Bull is an American club pro who opened the Palmas del Mar

resort's Gary Player course in the early 1980s and was there for the opening of a second course by Rees Jones in the late '90s. Palmas del Mar was particularly hard hit by the economic collapse and went bankrupt.

"We had a hay field for five months," says Bull, who had retired more than 10 years earlier but was recruited to get the golf courses operating again when the membership rescued them under the umbrella of the Palmas Athletic Club. "But we are pretty close now to what we had been condition-wise and we'll get there pretty quick now. We have a club, but visitors can play. It's \$125 in the winter and \$75 in the off-season which are pretty darn good rates."

Bull stayed in Puerto Rico after he retired, having fallen in love with the country not long after he moved from South Carolina. "It's a very family-oriented country, and there is a golf culture here. It's not big, but it's big enough. We have a lot of families who play here. It's something I've always liked about Puerto Rico. They're passionate about things and close-knit, and those who play golf are passionate about it."

Sidney Wolf is another American who has called Puerto Rico home for most of his life, and is president of the Puerto Rico Golf Association (4,000 members) and general chairman of the Puerto Rican Open. He's seen Puerto Rico's golf fortunes rise and fall, but is hopeful that the country's newest destinations fulfill what he feels is Puerto Rico's rightful destiny.

"For a long time Dorado was the only place in Puerto Rico that people knew about, though we had much more to offer," says Wolf. "Now that we have Royal Isabela, the Dorado Ritz, the Bahia Beach, we really do have world-class golf to offer. When you come here we treat you right, we feed you well, we give you a good time. And it's time that everybody knew that. Give us a chance and I'm sure you will not be disappointed." ❖

*Jeff Williams is a contributing editor of CIGAR AFICIONADO.*