

[4723GolfRM2Long.doc, Jeff Borg, 2,090 words]

MEXICAN CARIBBEAN GOLF

*Eleven challenging courses
make the Mexican Caribbean
a premium golf destination*

The thirty-something pharmaceutical rep had worked long and hard to get here, but what a reward! While his colleagues remained home in the icy Midwest, slogging through the snow still trying to make their numbers, Larry and his girlfriend basked in the toasty glow of another fabulous day of golf on the Mexican Caribbean.

“And it’s free,” erred the winner of his company’s sales contest. “It wasn’t free,” corrected the girlfriend. “You worked hard for this trip!”

Ten years ago, few golfers would have considered Cancún, Cozumel and Riviera Maya as a premium golf destination. Today, 10 luxurious courses of at least 18 holes, plus one with nine holes, lure *golfistas* to the Mexican Caribbean with perennially balmy weather and scenic layouts designed by the likes of PB Dye, Robert von Hagge, Jack Nicklaus and Greg Norman. This year the destination expects to debut two more amazing facilities, surpassing Los Cabos and making it Mexico’s undisputed leader in golf.

The PGA Tour discovered the destination in 2007 — its first time south of the border — when it came to El Camaleón Golf de Mayakoba, at charming Playa del Carmen. “The quality of the field has increased every year, this year easily being our strongest ever,” says Douglas Goubault, director of golf at Mayakoba.

In this, the third year of the Mayakoba Golf Classic, which climaxed in March, big-name players included Chad Campbell, Brian Gay, Charles Howell III, Tom Lehman, Corey Pavin and Bob Tway. Mark Wilson won the tournament, the \$648,000 prize and a 50-pound stone chameleon. After lifting the trophy, the 145-pound Wilson assured fans, “It’s not going to fly away.”

To win, Wilson shot a final-round 68, finishing at 267. “You’re so nervous and you somehow pull off one of the best shots [of the] week. It’s just pure joy and satisfaction,” he said. Previous winners were Fred Funk in 2007 and Brian Gay in 2008.

Lorena Ochoa has done as much as anyone for golf in Mexico. Before the young Mexican star of the LPGA burst onto the scene, few locals had much interest, despite the exciting layouts and great conditions here. But after she headlined for the University of Arizona, turning pro in 2002, Mexican kids started flocking to the game, and golfers started flocking to Mexico.

“Golf is really growing in Mexico,” Ochoa observed. “The weather is beautiful, and there are so many wonderful resorts and golf courses close to the water in Riviera Maya.

“Play golf. Have some fun. Go to a beautiful resort. It’s a great combination: everything you need to relax and have a family vacation or honeymoon; and the beaches here are the best — the sand, the water, the diving!

“I like everyone to experience our culture, to walk in the towns, go to the shops, get little presents typical of this place. When my friends visit Mexico, they all want to come back and stay. I’m very proud to be Mexican, to represent my country,” effuses Ochoa.

Goubault says, “We are working hard to do our part with a great initiative called Golf Para Todos, which hosts the public every month at our course, with free lunch, kids events, free clinics and range use, as well as great prizes and contests.”

He says Mayakoba's outreach program has grown to about 500 participants per month.

For details on the destination, contact The Mexican Caribbean Golf Association (52.998.886.2850/984.206.3088, www.cancungolf.org). American Airlines and American Eagle (www.aa.com) serve the destination via both Cancún (CUN) and Cozumel (CZM).

Cancún Area

Cancún Golf Club at Pok Ta Pok. Cancún's pioneer golf course was designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr. in 1976, wedged between the calm Nichupte Lagoon and brilliant Caribbean Sea, central to the bustling hotel zone. The updated 18-hole par-72 course offers watery views, narrow fairways, high difficulty and an ancient Maya site on location. Yardage: 6,750. Greens fee: **\$145 to \$175 for 18 holes, \$115 to \$125 twilight. Clubs: \$45.**

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Hilton Cancún Golf & Spa Resort. After a \$6 million renovation, the 18-hole par-72 Hilton course, in Cancún's hotel zone, has new Paspalum Sea Isle 1 grass, the salt-resistant turf used by top Caribbean clubs for coastal courses. On the par-5 9th hole, second shots have to nail a narrow landing, but golfers who keep their balls dry get a shot at a birdie. The incredible 10th demands accuracy, as trees, sand and Nichupte Lagoon threaten from all sides. Beware the 12th, where crocodiles play through. An ancient Maya site overlooks the 15th. The club welcomes all guests, and Hoyo 19 serves food and drink under the gaze of wild

peacocks. Greens fee: \$129 to \$199 for 18 holes, twilight \$99 to \$149. Clubs: Titleist and Callaway for \$50, Adams for \$30, Mizuno and Precept for \$25.

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Moon Spa & Golf Club. This Jack-Nicklaus-designed layout, north of Puerto Morelos, pays close attention to the environment, surrounded by mangrove forests, exotic birds and wild animals. Once an 18-hole championship layout, nine more holes were added. The Jungle, Lakes and Dunes courses, each a par-36, total 10,798 yards. Players can combine them for a par-72 18-hole round. Even those with nerves of steel face a challenge on the Lakes 8th, a 133-yard par-3 that plays to an island green. On the Jungle, the dogleg left, 450-yard, par-4 3rd is rated toughest. Players have to avoid a large bunker left of the fairway and a pot bunker right of the green. Yardage: Dunes-Jungle 7,196, Jungle-Lakes 7,201, Lakes-Dunes 7,199. Greens fee: \$260 for 18 holes, \$165 twilight. Clubs: Callaway, Nike, Ping and Taylor Made for \$50, Mizunno and Srixon for \$30.

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Playa Mujeres Golf Club. One of Cancún's newest layouts, the Greg Norman signature course opened in 2006 and was designed with respect for environmentally sensitive areas just north of town. On the mainland, downwind from the beach and water-sports mecca of Isla Mujeres, it demands good accuracy and challenges even the most experienced players. With a well-appointed clubhouse and pro shop, the par-72 course has a rating of 74.5, slope of 139, 18

holes open now and 36 on the master plan. That plan includes commercial development, tennis courts, 2.3 miles of beach, eight large resorts, several gated home sites and 180 slips of full-service marina. Yardage: 7,218. Greens fee: \$185 to \$220 for 18 holes, twilight rates available. Clubs: Callaway for \$55.

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Riviera Cancún Golf. This Jack Nicklaus signature course, open less than a year, features strategic bunkering and Paspalum Supreme grass on fairways and greens. Hole 14 overlooks the sea, and a peaceful natural reserve surrounds the course, with dunes, lakes, mangroves and native palms. The contemporary Mexican clubhouse, with a good view of the 18th, allows golfers to relax and enjoy the tranquility from its wide-open terraces. It includes an air-conditioned snack area, bar and pro shop, plus sauna facilities to work out kinks. Practice on the driving range and putting greens. Rent right- or left-handed clubs for men or women. Yardage: 7,060. Greens fee: **\$230 for 18 holes, \$140 twilight.** Rates include cart, snacks, beverages and transportation to and from the course. Clubs: \$30 for Bridestone or Mizunno, \$50 for Callaway, Nike, TaylorMade or Titleist.

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Cozumel Island

Cozumel Country Club. On the resort island of Cozumel, famed for great diving and snorkeling, this club offers great golf as well. The 6,734-yard par-72

course tests players of all skill levels, winding through jungle, mangroves and wetlands just a few kilometers from town. The first course in Mexico certified by Audubon for its environmental planning, these links are operated by ClubCorp, whose US, Australian, and European members enjoy preferred rates and tee times. Greens fee: **\$169 for 18 holes in summer, \$105 twilight**. Clubs: Nike and Taylor Made for \$50, Tour Edge for \$29.

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Riviera Maya

El Camaleón Golf de Mayakoba. As the name suggests, El Camaleón changes color and texture as it slithers through the jungle, mangrove and seafront. Managed by Fairmont, it hosts the Mayakoba Classic, the only PGA Tour event in Mexico. Near Playa del Carmen, this Greg Norman design opens with a cenote in the middle of the first fairway. The 200-yard par-3 10th hole straddles a canal. Toughest is the 14th, a 452-yard par-4, where golfers face a prevailing wind and have to negotiate a canal that crosses a narrow fairway 290 yards out. Tee shots at the 116-yard 7th and 155-yard 15th, both par-3 holes that play right up to the beach, may bedevil golfers, but the Caribbean views are heavenly. GPS in the carts displays yardage and layout. Boats ferry guests to the modern clubhouse from any room on the property. Yardage: 7,067. Greens fee: **\$170 to \$235 for 18 holes, \$102 to 141 twilight**.

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Iberostar Playa Paraíso Golf Club. Iberostar opened an 18-hole par-72 course in Playa Paraíso amid its five resorts here, and guests enjoy free rounds. The tough PB Dye design incorporates natural jungle, narrow fairways, undulating greens, deep bunkers and unique hand-laid stonework. The par-5 holes challenge players with their length, particularly the 547-yard 7th and 548-yard 18th. The 451-yard, par-4, dogleg 11th hole makes another good test. Iberostar features a lighted driving range and practice green. Snacks and drinks are included at the clubhouse. Yardage: 6,800. Greens fee: **\$130 to \$195 for 18 holes, \$95 to \$130 twilight.** Clubs: Mizuno, Nike and Titleist, in steel or graphite, for \$40.

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El Manglar Riviera Maya. Near Playa del Secreto, this Jack-Nicklaus-designed, par-54 layout features plenty of bunkers and water hazards to make the executive par-3 interesting. The prettiest, most memorable hole is the 195-yard 18th, surrounded by water and featuring an island green. Lots of sand on the 223-yard 4th hole makes it a day at the beach if the shot is not precise. The tee shot requires a long carry over a waste bunker, with another bunker to the left. Yardage: 2,923. Greens fee: \$129 for 18 holes, **\$79 twilight.** Clubs: King Cobra for \$25.

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Playacar Spa & Golf Club. At the center of Riviera Maya's luxurious Playacar development, this 18-hole course is dotted with cenotes. The challenging par-72 Robert von Hagge design features narrow fairways, undulating greens and diverse lakes. With wind in the face, a par-4 is almost like a birdie on the well-trapped 468-yard 7th — the toughest hole on the course. Tee off next to an ancient Maya site for the 600-yard par-5 11th hole. New GPS systems in the carts allow exact distancing, electronic scoring, live leaderboards, and food and beverage orders. A fine spa seduces golfers and partners with soothing massages, footbaths and facials. Yardage: 7,144. Greens fee: \$190 for 18 holes, \$130 twilight. Clubs: Steel for \$30, VIP for \$50.

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Puerto Aventuras Golf & Racquet Club. Weaving throughout the town, the 3,255-yard, par-36, nine-hole Puerto Aventuras club offers several challenging par-4 holes. Toughest is the 417-yard 7th, with a dogleg around a prominent tree on the right side of the fairway, about 150 yards from the tee. Careful, many other pleasant distractions compete with the links in Puerto Aventuras, including the 95-yacht marina, modern condos, playful dolphins, restaurants, bars and shops. Yardage: 3,255. Greens fee: \$80 for 18 holes, \$60 twilight. Clubs: \$20.

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