



# Par for San Juan

Puerto Rico is known for sun and sand, but as a golf destination, it is often overlooked. Such a pity. By Tom Harack

**ANY GOLF FANATIC** will tell you that there really isn't a bad time to play, and several factors make a trip to Puerto Rico especially worthwhile. For starters, a number of new courses have either just opened or are preparing to do so. And as the total number of courses on the island hovers just over two dozen, many of the existing course layouts have remodeled or renovated in the face of the increased competition.

"Golf is definitely booming," confirms Lemuel Beauchamp, the editor in chief of *Caribbean Golf Magazine*. Beauchamp pegs the number of Puerto Rican golfers at about 10,000, and he says that the estimated annual growth rate for the last four years was a whopping 30 percent. "We have a thriving juniors program; the game attracts an upscale demographic; and there's a lot of variety in the available choices, with

some old resort standards and some instant classics," he says.

As overseas destinations go, Puerto Rico's United States Commonwealth status makes it a particularly comfortable one for other Americans. English is widely spoken, and the currency is the U.S. dollar, so travelers don't have to worry about fluctuations in exchange rates.

Here, you can get a righteous sampling of golf interspersed with a self-guided tour of the island and its distinct regions. While there are still some bargains relative to the mainland, prime-time greens fees for some of these courses approach \$200 — another reason to visit sooner rather than later, since the game's burgeoning popularity predictably has the same effect on prices.

**Bahia Beach Plantation Golf Course**, a public course opened in 1991 and designed by J.B. Gold, is generally regarded as the best deal in Puerto Rico. Comparatively short at around 6,800 yards, par 72, it is tight in many spots and also features the island's most scenic oceanside three-hole sequence.

**Coamo Springs Golf Club** — with an inland setting at the base of the Cordillera Central, which divides Puerto Rico's two fundamental ecosystems (the tropical north and the more arid south) — is decidedly off the beaten path but worth the effort. Home to therapeutic hot springs frequented almost exclusively by the locals, the 6,647-yard layout, designed by Ferdinand Garbin, has a wild mountain quality, unlike its resort counterparts.

**Coco Beach Golf & Country Club** is one of the latest courses to open on the island. It is close to the international airport in San Juan, just to the west, and there are 72 holes within three miles of Coco Beach, which in turn is adjacent to the lavish Paradisus Puerto Rico, a new, all-inclusive beachfront resort. Not only does Coco Beach Golf & Country Club have 36 holes, but the four nines make for

a fairly comprehensive primer of the island's topography, including a mountainside golf experience with huge changes in elevation, striking perspectives of El Yunque National Forest, some rolling terrain, and intermittent views of the Atlantic and Espiritú Santu River. Designed by Tom Kite and Bruce Besse Jr., the in-house architect for Massachusetts-based Southworth Development Corp., the



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## Putting around San Juan

**Bahia Beach Plantation Golf Course**, \$55 to \$80, (787) 256-5600

**Coamo Springs Golf Club**, \$50 to \$60, (787) 825-1370, [www.coamosprings.com](http://www.coamosprings.com)

**Coco Beach Golf & Country Club**, \$90 to \$110, (787) 657-2000, [www.cocobeachgolf.com](http://www.cocobeachgolf.com)

**Costa Caribe Golf & Country Club**, \$55 to \$85, (787) 848-1000, [www.costacaribe-resort.com](http://www.costacaribe-resort.com)

**The Dorado Del Mar Golf Club**, \$60 to \$102, (787) 796-3065

**El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa**, \$110 to \$130, (787) 863-6784

**El Legado Golf Resort**, \$60, (787) 648-1818, [www.ellegadogolfresort.com](http://www.ellegadogolfresort.com)

**The Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort and Country Club**, \$90 to \$155, (787) 796-8961, [www.doradobeach.hyatt.com](http://www.doradobeach.hyatt.com)

**The Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa**, \$130 to \$160, (787) 888-6000, [www.westinriomar.com/golf](http://www.westinriomar.com/golf)

Hyatt Dorado Beach  
Resort and Country Club



emphasis is on playability. The putting surfaces are large and without severe contours, and trouble usually guards only one side of most fairways and greens.

**Costa Caribe Golf & Country Club** — situated near Ponce, a pleasant town with a much more old-world scale and feel than San Juan — is a brand-new course adjacent to the Hilton Ponce Golf & Casino Resort. Another Bruce Besse Jr. design, Costa Caribe's 27 holes often remind players of desert golf, with mountain views in the distance. But it also has Puerto Rico's first island green, several holes with ocean views, frequently gusty winds, and some intriguing mounding to give definition to a flat, former sugarcane plantation.

Costa Caribe, in fact, makes for a reasonable microcosm of the golf scene on the island. The brainchild of a golf-loving Puerto Rican family who amassed a fortune distilling rum, it draws on an avid local membership, guests from the nearby resort, and hard-core walk-ons intent on playing as much as possible before returning to perhaps less-temperate environments on the mainland. It is the sort of thing that makes a golfer covet one of the residences being constructed adjacent to the course.

**The Dorado Del Mar Golf Club** has 18 holes with a par 72 of 6,937 yards, designed by Puerto Rican golf legend Chi Chi Rodriguez. It was joined last year by **El Legado Golf Resort**, a 7,217-yard, par-72 track in the south.

**El Conquistador Resort & Golden Door Spa** is on the island's eastern extremity, perched dramatically atop the cliffs of Las Croabas at the convergence of the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Part of a giant resort, its 6,662-yard, par-72 course, designed by Arthur Hills, is a quirky roller-coaster ride and an adventure in club selection that has achieved something approaching cult status.

**The Hyatt Dorado Beach Resort & Country Club** is on the lush northern coast, about 25 miles west of San Juan. There are four 18-hole courses designed by the ubiquitous Robert Trent Jones Sr. The best known of the four is the East Course, 7,005 yards, par 72, with mesmerizing Atlantic views and a couple of icons of Caribbean golf, especially the fourth hole, a Z-shaped par 5 of 540 yards.

**The Westin Rio Mar Beach Golf Resort & Spa**, next to the Westin resort, has two substantially different 18-hole tracks anchored by the Ocean Course, which has the distinction of being one of the last collaborations of George and Tom Fazio. Now a standard of tropical design, it is 6,782 yards, par 72, with trademark features that include tricky green complexes and giant iguanas roaming

the grounds. The Greg Norman-designed River Course is nearly 7,000 yards, par 72 from the back tees. The routing follows the Mamaeyes River and surrounding wetlands and has narrower fairways and a few forced carries. **AW**

**TOM HARACK** is a freelancer who has written about golf destinations around the world for *T&L Golf*, *Golf Magazine*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Men's Journal*.

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