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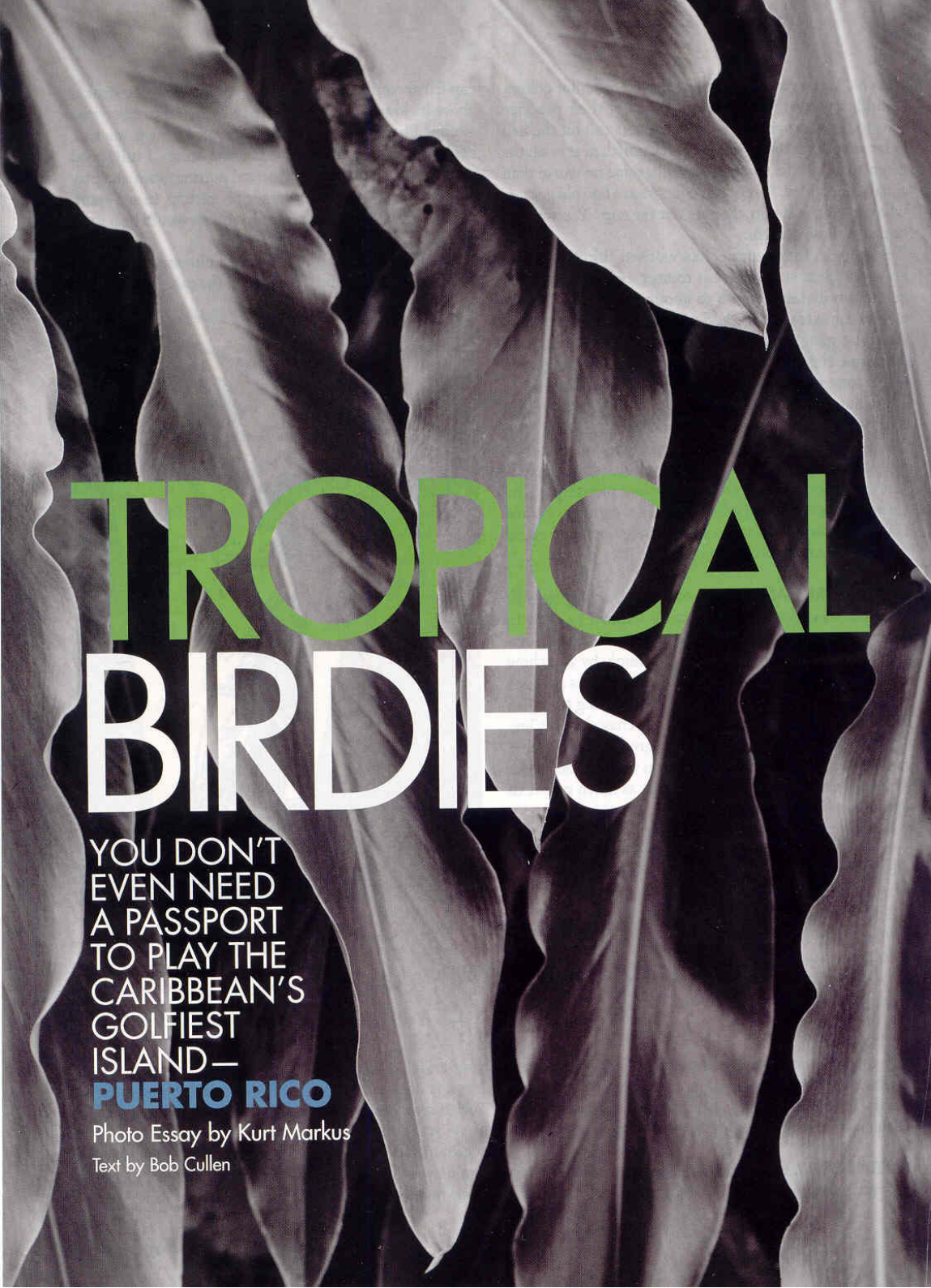
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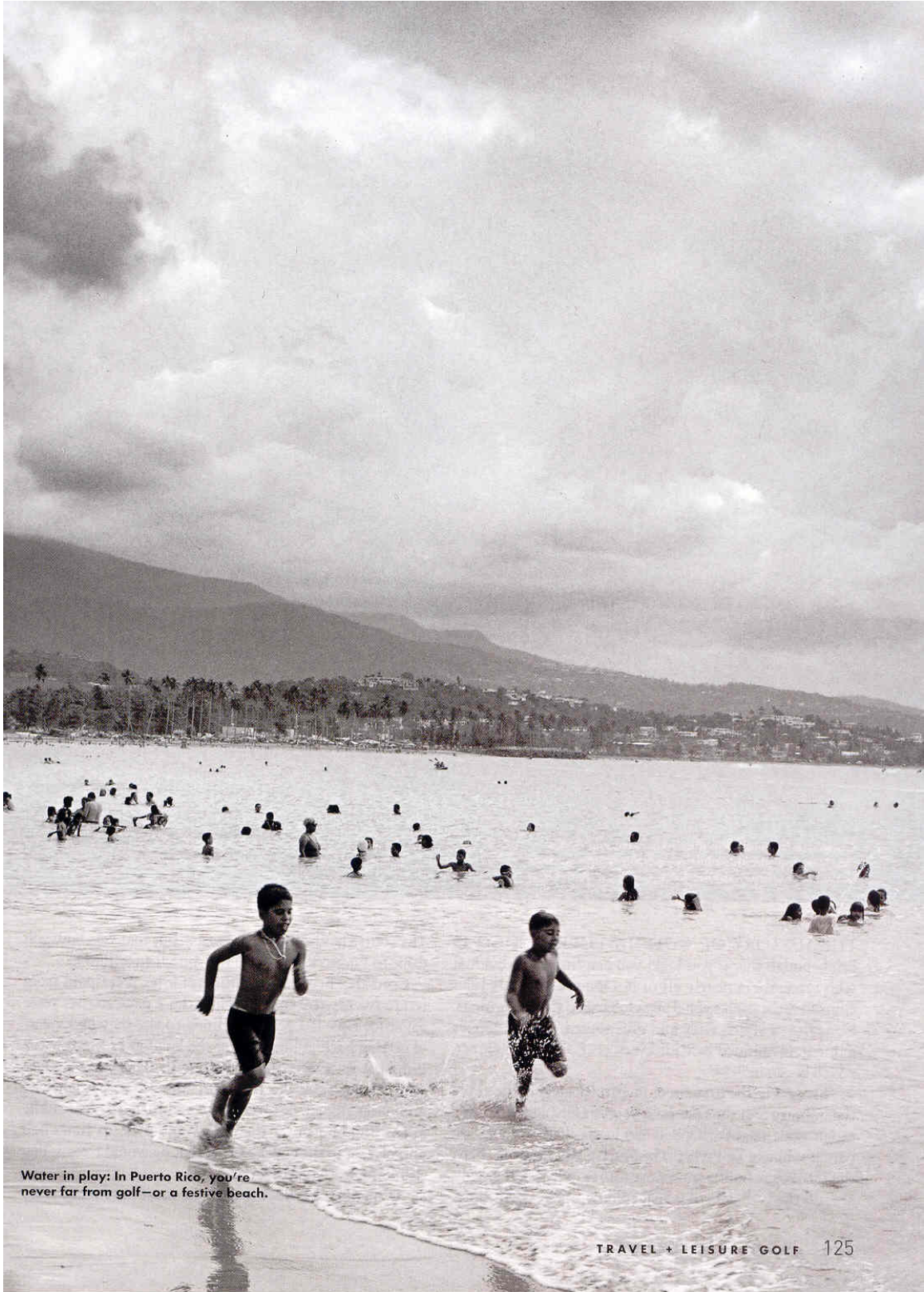
# TROPICAL BIRDIES

YOU DON'T  
EVEN NEED  
A PASSPORT  
TO PLAY THE  
CARIBBEAN'S  
GOLFIEST  
ISLAND—

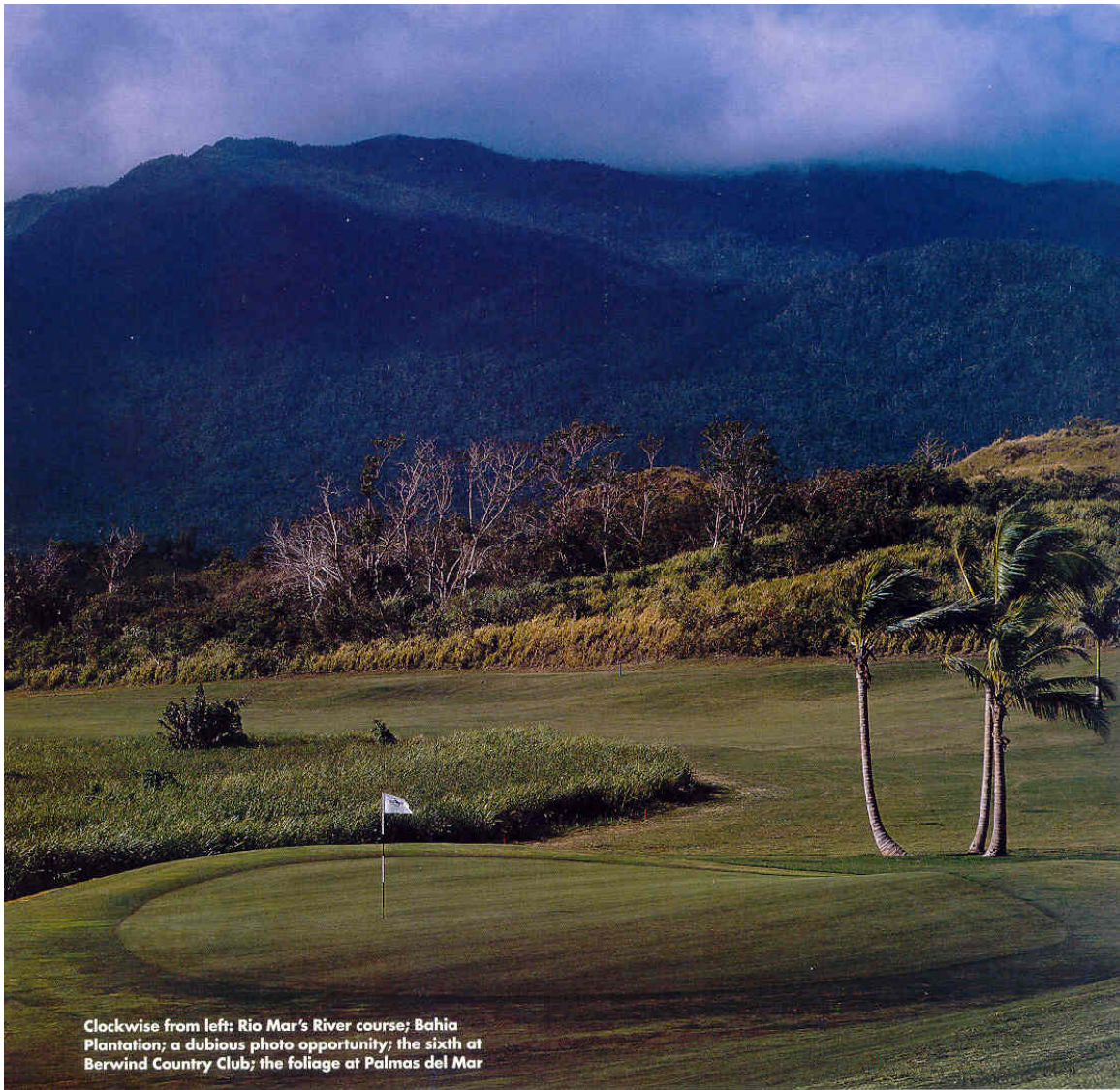
**PUERTO RICO**

Photo Essay by Kurt Markus

Text by Bob Cullen



Water in play: In Puerto Rico, you're never far from golf—or a festive beach.



Clockwise from left: Rio Mar's River course; Bahia Plantation; a dubious photo opportunity; the sixth at Berwind Country Club; the foliage at Palmas del Mar

THE HISTORY OF GOLF IN PUERTO RICO IS brief enough that if you look, you can find an individual who remembers nearly all of it. One such man is Juan Gonzalez, the professional at a club called Coamo Springs. Gonzalez is short, wiry and green-eyed, and he carries a line in his tanned face for every year of his golf career, which began in 1950.

That was in the first era of Puerto Rican golf, the era of the military and the fake hole in one. Gonzalez lived in a tough, poor neighborhood in San Juan called, without apparent whimsy, La Perla ("The Pearl"). Not far from there, the U.S. Army built a nine-hole course, with sand greens, around the walls of a Spanish colonial fortress, El Moro.

The course has been gone for years, but that was how golf came to Puerto Rico—with the American military.

Gonzalez became a caddie. Caddies were paid from ten to twenty-five cents a bag in those days, so they were eager for tips. If a golfer declined to tip, they had a way of getting back at him. One of the holes at El Moro was a blind par three over the fortress walls. There was a golfer whose name Gonzalez recalls as Tom. He was a tightwad and never tipped. So, every now and then, the forecaddie at the blind hole over the wall would pick up Tom's ball and place it in the cup, assuring that he would have to buy drinks for everyone that day.

"When I was caddying there he must have made sixty





Palms Sunday: The Flamboyán boasts some of the island's best ocean course views.



holes in one," Gonzalez remembers, all but giggling.

A caddie could play for free on Mondays, and Gonzalez did. At first, he had one club, a wedge, and played all nine holes with it. He skipped school to play. His father would beat him for that. But within a year, he was a skilled golfer.

That prepared him for the second era of Puerto Rican golf, the era of the resort and the trick shot. In 1958, Laurance Rockefeller opened a resort about twenty miles west of San Juan near a beach town called Dorado. It was a luxurious place. The low-slung guest rooms were in brick casitas, strung along the ocean. If you were sailing a few hundred yards offshore, you might not know the resort was there.

Rockefeller hired Robert Trent Jones to design a golf course with grass greens and sea views. The course needed pros, and the resort hired Gonzalez and another former caddie, Juan Rodriguez, whose friends called him Chi Chi.

Chi Chi would, of course, go on to fame on the U.S. pro tours, but in those early years at Dorado Beach, he and Gonzalez played a role akin to that of the *tumbler*, the social director in the old Catskill resorts of New York.

"We had to entertain the guests," Gonzalez recalls. "Chi Chi was a showman, and we developed trick-shot routines." Chi Chi and Juan would hit shots out of paper cups. They would hit shots sitting and kneeling. They would hit shots off tees two feet high. They would take a five-iron and hit one ball down the left side and fade it and then, very quickly, another ball down the right side and draw it, so the two balls would cross in flight. They would hit shots off the toe of the club and stop them on the practice green.

"It's easy," Gonzalez says. He gets up from his chair near the clubhouse at Coamo Springs and walks over to a concrete apron where carts are parked. He drops a ball. He takes a wedge and turns the face so that it's aimed at his shoes. The toe of the club is pointing at the ball. He swings. The toe makes crisp contact with the ball, which soars to the eighteenth green and plops down, stopping about thirty feet from the flag. Gonzalez is apologetic that it isn't closer. "I haven't practiced it in a while," he says.

He worked for decades as a resort pro while golf spread along the island's north coast: from Dorado Beach to Rio Mar to El Conquistador to Palmas del Mar. Then the third era of Puerto Rican golf brought him to Coamo Springs.

IN THE THIRD ERA—IN WHICH WE NOW LIVE—golf is no longer just a tourist diversion. Puerto Rico, Gonzalez estimates, has about 40,000 golfers. The game is decidedly chic with the island's growing business elite. In the past decade, the number of courses has roughly doubled to meet the demand.

The new courses don't necessarily belong to North American resort chains. The Serralles family, maker of Don Q rum, owns the twenty-seven-hole Costa Caribe Country Club. A real estate developer, Hector M. Torres,



owns Coamo Springs, where Gonzalez figures 85 percent of the rounds are played by locals. And Chi Chi owns a new course he designed called El Legado. Every Puerto Rican course of note operates as a semiprivate facility, dividing its tee times among local members, daily-fee players and tourists. Puerto Ricans are taking the game brought to them by the military and the tourists and making it their own.

This is both good and bad news for the visitor from North America. The good news, as Ronald Reagan might have said, is the magic of the marketplace: choice and competition.

Thanks to Costa Caribe, Coamo Springs and El Legado, you can now, for instance, opt to play south of the Cordillera Central, the chain of hills and mountains running

east to west that forms the island's spine. The mountains block a lot of the rain that is carried to the north side of the island by the prevailing trade winds. In the average December, the northern city of Dorado gets 6.37 inches of rain; Ponce, in the south, gets 1.13 inches. That's a lot of washed-out rounds avoided.

The newcomers are also spurring competition. Most of the established resorts have added a new course or have given old ones major face-lifts in the past five years. The new ones feel pressed to offer something still better.

"I noticed that there were not a lot of courses in the Caribbean with fun greens," says Tom Kite, who did the greens and the bunkering for a Bruce Besse Jr. routing at



Clockwise from top left: at play on the playa; a window onto El Yunque Forest; the well-cratered fifth at Bahía; the many elevations of El Conquistador

the new Coco Beach complex. “So I gave this one large greens with lots of contours.”

Indeed, Coco Beach has moved far from the standard that prevailed in the early days of Puerto Rican resort golf, when the tendency in green construction was to push up a little dirt, then let the Bermuda spread. But Coco’s greens stop short of being cruelly severe. “It’s a resort course, and we don’t want to beat people up,” Kite says.

Chi Chi felt the competition as he designed El Legado. It will, ultimately, be his answer to Arnold Palmer’s Bay Hill, with a small resort hotel. “This is where my trophies and awards will be. It’s where I’ll be when I’m not in the States playing. I want to be able to say hello to everyone,”

he says. “But I wouldn’t make it as hard as Bay Hill.”

Instead, he says, it will surpass other Puerto Rican courses in details such as the quality of the turf. El Legado will have “the only California-style greens in Puerto Rico,” Rodriguez says, with surfaces covered in TifEagle.

There’s even now a bit of price competition. À la carte fees at established north-coast resorts can be high—up to \$200 per round. As in Florida and Arizona, the fee structure at most Puerto Rican resorts is designed to extract the highest pay from the winter tourist. There are, however, lower fees for club members and locals, particularly in the off-season. In the new era, it wouldn’t hurt to ask for the local rate if you’re booking a round; you might get

it. And the south-coast courses offer bargains to everyone.

In truth, there's enough variety in Puerto Rican golf now to justify renting a car and taking a golf-infused road trip instead of letting a hotel van drive you from the airport to a single resort. The island boasts a reliable, well-marked network of four-lane divided highways, and getting around is simple—although you may come to find that a large percentage of the vehicles you encounter have apparently got defective turn signals.

You'll notice that almost wherever you go, Puerto Rican golf is enclave golf. The courses are inside gated resorts or gated communities, and the only nongolfers you'll encounter are likely to be the iguanas at Rio Mar, the pelicans at Dorado Beach or the egrets at El Legado.

PUERTO RICAN GOLF IS ALSO, ALMOST WITHOUT exception, cart golf. Motorized play is now so entrenched that the sign on Highway 3 marking the turn to the Coco Beach course is a silhouette of a man driving a cart. The only course I found that allows walking is Coamo Springs, and that's only on Mondays.

You'll also discover that although many Puerto Rican courses include the words "mar" or "ocean" or "beach" in their titles, they mostly play inland, visiting the Caribbean here and there for a par three along the beach or a green perched on a point. The seaside property is generally too valuable for development to give all of it over to golf.

Which—finally—brings up the only downside to the growing popularity of golf in Puerto Rico. Islanders not only want to play the game, but they also want to own condos or villas on the courses. Many lovely vistas are now blocked by residential developments. If you play the oceanside par threes (numbers three and four) at the Palm course at Palmas del Mar, for example, you may lose your concentration imagining what it would be like to live in one of the condos lining the holes.

But that is a quibble. There is a legend, rooted in Puerto Rico's diverse heritage, borrowing from both Santeria and Catholicism. The legend tells of a deity called Yemaya who reigns in the heavens; and where the bottom of her mantle touches the earth, it turns into the ocean. The waves and the sea foam are her ruffles and lace. Anyone who seeks a boon from Yemaya must toss something into the sea—a bit of sugar syrup, seven copper coins or perhaps a few candles.

I had none of these when I played the finishing hole at Bahia Beach. The edge of a passing hurricane was blowing in from the sea so fiercely that the staff had removed the pins from the holes. Somehow, I managed to hit a three-iron approach that stopped only a few feet from a hole I hadn't seen. When I finished, I dropped the ball in the rough and hit it out into the waves, as an offering.

I wanted to return. •

## PUERTO RICAN GOLF

### COAMO SPRINGS GOLF CLUB

Route 546, Kilometer 1, Coamo; 787-825-1370, coamosprings.com. YARDAGE: 6,647. PAR: 72. SLOPE: 134. ARCHITECT: Ferdinand Garbin, 1998. GREENS FEES: \$50-\$75. **T+L GOLF Rating: ★★★★★**

Friendly and unpretentious, this is the unheralded gem of Puerto Rican golf. Architect Garbin scored the best natural golfing terrain of any Puerto Rican course; it's set in the rolling foothills of the Cordillera Central. You'll find sidehill lies, blind shots, mountain views and, on the final hole, a daring carry over a ravine to cap your round.

### HYATT DORADO BEACH, EAST COURSE

Highway 693, Dorado; 787-796-8961, doradobeach.hyatt.com. YARDAGE: 7,000. PAR: 72. SLOPE: 140. ARCHITECTS: Robert Trent Jones Sr., 1958; Ray Floyd, 1998. GREENS FEES: \$155-\$195.

**T+L GOLF Rating: ★★★★★**

The island's premier course when Robert Trent Jones Sr. designed it in 1958, and after a polishing by Ray Floyd, it remains so. The elegant layout includes Puerto Rico's sportiest hole, the par-five fourth, a double dogleg with two optional water carries; it climaxes with a plateau green overlooking the sea.

### COCO BEACH GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB

100 Clubhouse Drive, Rio Grande; 787-657-2000, cocobeachgolf.com. YARDAGE: 3,499 (Lakes); 3,519 (Ocean); 3,524 (Palms); 3,500 (Mountain). PAR: 36 (each). ARCHITECTS: Tom Kite and Bruce Besse Jr., 2004. GREENS FEES: \$90-\$110.

**T+L GOLF Rating: ★★★★★ (potential)**

Perhaps the finest land at this thirty-six-hole complex was given to the Mountain nine, which scales the foothills toward El Yunque National Forest. Judging by the quality of the first eighteen holes to open and a preliminary look at the second eighteen (scheduled to open in the spring), Coco Beach will soon take its place among the best resorts on the entire island.

### EL LEGADO DE CHI CHI RODRIGUEZ GOLF RESORT

713 Highway 53, Guayama; 787-686-1806. YARDAGE: 7,217. PAR: 72. SLOPE: n/a. ARCHITECT: Chi Chi Rodriguez, 2004. GREENS FEE: \$60. **T+L GOLF Rating: ★★★★★ (potential)**

The course's name means "the legacy," and that's what Chi Chi intends it to be—his legacy to Puerto Rican golf. Judging from a round as it was growing in, El Legado will be an open, fun layout with wide fairways and testing green complexes demanding good decisions and shot making.

### PALMAS DEL MAR COUNTRY CLUB, FLAMBOYÁN COURSE

1 Country Club Drive, Humacao; 787-285-2255, palmascountryclub.com. YARDAGE: 7,122. PAR: 72. SLOPE: 135. ARCHITECT: Rees Jones, 1998. GREENS FEE: \$95. **T+L GOLF Rating: ★★★★★**

Palmas del Mar has poured money into maintenance the past

few years. It shows. Flamboyán is solid, well-conditioned and superbly balanced, with power holes, finesse holes, holes that favor draws and holes that favor fades. The par-three twelfth is one of the island's best.

## PALMAS DEL MAR COUNTRY CLUB, PALM COURSE

1 Country Club Drive, Humacao; 787-285-2255, palmascountryclub.com. YARDAGE: 6,675. PAR: 71. SLOPE: 127. ARCHITECT: Gary Player, 1974. GREENS FEE: \$95.

**T+L GOLF Rating: ★★★★★**

In recent years, this layout has been eclipsed by Palmas del Mar's newer Flamboyán course—and the many condos lining the routing don't help matters. But Gary Player got first choice of ground here and took advantage of it, designing a track that flows over hills and dells and merits a round by those who enjoy holes that make them think off the tee.

## RIO MAR COUNTRY CLUB, OCEAN COURSE

6000 Rio Mar Boulevard, Palmer; 787-888-6000, westinriomar.com/golf. YARDAGE: 6,782. PAR: 72. SLOPE: 132. ARCHITECTS: George and Tom Fazio, 1974. GREENS FEES: \$100–\$190.

**T+L GOLF Rating: ★★★★★**

Rio Mar boasts an unusual mascot: the iguana. Dozens of the fat, yellow-and-black lizards like to sun themselves on the course. You'll have to focus a little more than they do to score well here. The Ocean saves most of its challenges for the green complexes, allowing players of all abilities to putter around while keeping it interesting for the good ones.

## BEST OF THE REST

There are twenty-seven holes at the **Costa Caribe Golf & Country Club** (\$75–\$85; 787-812-2650), and designer Bruce Besse Jr. was clever with his bulldozer on all of them, molding sizable slopes and well-placed water hazards. The owners of the **River Course at the Rio Mar Country Club** (\$100–\$190; 787-888-6000) gave architect Greg Norman a tough piece of land—low and marshy, without sea views—but he responded admirably, with a layout good enough to cohost the 2004 World Amateur Team Championship. The **West**



**Course at Hyatt Dorado Beach** (\$155–\$195; 787-796-8961), with too many flat and straight holes, was always known as the relief course here, but after a recent face-lift by Ray Floyd, the greens and bunkers are much improved, and it's now far more than mere relief. **Bahia Beach**



**Plantation Golf Course** (\$70–\$90; 787-256-5600) boasts three seaside holes that constitute the longest and best stretch of beach golf on the island. The rest of the course is tight and challenging. Some of the tees at the **Wyndham El Conquistador** (\$110–\$190; 787-863-6784) are so elevated that hitting the fairway is like driving a ball onto Fifth Avenue—from the Goodyear blimp.

## WHERE TO STAY

### HOTEL EL CONVENTO

100 Calle Cristo, Old San Juan; 787-723-9020, elconvento.com. ROOMS: \$255–\$415. SUITES: \$500–\$1,750.

The nuns left a century ago, and the building was almost demolished, but in 1997 it reopened as a luxury hotel. Today, the smallish rooms may offer a sense of convent life, though it's unlikely the sisters ever envisioned the cocktail hour on the terrace overlooking the city.

### HYATT DORADO BEACH RESORT & COUNTRY CLUB

Highway 693, Dorado; 800-233-1234, doradobeach.hyatt.com. ROOMS: \$200–\$660. SUITES: \$400–\$2,040.

Laurance Rockefeller, who founded the place, was the conservationist of his clan. The hotel's understated elegance reflects this. Look for the discreet bronze plaques that note which world leader stayed in which room during the economic summit of 1976.

### PARADISUS PUERTO RICO

Coco Beach, Rio Grande; 800-336-3542, paradisus-puerto-rico.com. ROOMS: \$425–\$695. VILLAS: \$1,250–\$1,500.

If you like lots of marble and Doric columns rising from the swimming pool, this is the place for you. The "all-inclusive" tab does not include golf. It does, however, include all the piña coladas you can drink, which might be comforting after a tough round.

### PONCE HILTON AND CASINO

1150 Caribe Avenue, Ponce; 800-981-3232, hiltoncaribbean.com/ponce. ROOMS: \$240. SUITES: \$365–\$440.

The place to stay for golf on Puerto Rico's south coast. For extra

## golfguide

amenities, ask for a room with access to the executive lounge. It offers evening cocktails and high-speed Internet access.

### WESTIN RIO MAR BEACH GOLF RESORT & SPA

6000 Rio Mar Boulevard, Rio Grande; 800-474-6627, westinriomar.com. ROOMS: \$425-\$700. SUITES: \$700-\$3,200.

Rio Mar has the two aforementioned golf courses, a long stretch of beach and just about every other amenity a traveler in Puerto Rico could want, from a casino to a dozen eateries, lounges and entertainment areas.

### WYNDHAM EL CONQUISTADOR RESORT & GOLDEN DOOR SPA

1000 Conquistador Avenue, Las Croabas; 787-863-1000, wyndhamelconquistador.com. ROOMS: \$279-\$779. SUITES: \$1,129-\$2,179.

Another big, all-encompassing resort with a casino and sports bar, the Wyndham occupies a dramatic bluff overlooking the sea.

## WHERE TO EAT

### DRAGONFLY

(Latinasian) 364 Calle Fortaleza, Old San Juan; 787-977-3886. \$\$\$\$

Items such as "Peking duck nachos" may seem unlikely fusions, and the label "Latinasian" might seem a bit precious. Then again, eight years ago, so did "Cablinasian."

### EL NUEVO HORIZONTE

(Cocina Criolla) Kilometer 8.8, Highway 901, Yabucoa; 787-893-5492. \$\$\$

As you sip your post-round drink, watch squalls drift over the Caribbean Sea while the chefs in the kitchen prepare *Cocina Criolla*, the traditional hearty cuisine of Puerto Rico.

### EL TENEDOR

(Cocina Criolla) 1 Calle Emilia Principe, Juncos; 787-734-6573. \$\$  
Located in the shell of an old rum distillery, El Tenedor offers both island flavor and fine grilled sandwiches.

### LA FONDA EL JIBARITO

(Cocina Criolla) 280 Calle Sol, Old San Juan; 787-725-8375. \$\$  
This soul-food joint in Old San Juan is simple and good; particularly tasty are the grilled shrimp, rice dishes and fried plantains.

### MARK'S AT THE MELIA

(International) 75 Calle Cristina, Ponce; 787-284-6275. \$\$\$\$  
A nouvelle take on Puerto Rican fare, featuring such offerings as



Caribbean shrimp with mofongo. The desserts—blends of ice cream and liqueurs—are best nixed if you need to putt well on the morrow.

## PUERTO RICO PLUS

### ORIENTATION

There are nonstop flights to the **Luiz Muñoz Marín International Airport** in San Juan from many North American cities, making Puerto Rico a very convenient destination. From that airport, **Dorado**, **Rio Mar**, **Coco Beach** and **Bahia Beach** are each about a half-hour drive. **Palmas del Mar** is an hour away and **Ponce** is about an hour and a half.

### NIGHTLIFE

If you'd like to inject a little of Puerto Rico's throbbing nightlife into your golf holiday, you'll have to leave campus and head for San Juan. Once there, you would do well to start the evening by braving the line to get into and wine and dine at **Dragonfly** in Old San Juan. Many of the capital's beautiful people will be there.

After dinner, you might be in the mood for music, and there's a good place across the street: the **Parrot Club**, with live music on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights—from Latin jazz to fusion to salsa.

If you want to dance, you have a myriad of options. One of the best is to hop a cab to the **Wyndham El San Juan**, in the Isla Verde section of town. The **Club Babylon** is a two-story disco that draws a chic crowd dancing to everything from salsa to trance, and the **El Chico Lounge** in the same hotel has bands playing salsa music.

### OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Some of the highest peaks in Puerto Rico are in **El Yunque National Forest**, within sight of San Juan, which makes for a fine hike. One of the best trails leads to the summit of Mount Britton, with views of the city, the sea and several golf courses. Along the way, you'll see jungle streams, hummingbirds and tropical flowers.

If your off-course tastes go in more urban directions, try **Old San Juan**, which mixes the ambience of an old Spanish Main port with a Middle American shopping mall. If you can, visit the first Tuesday of the month, when the galleries stay open long into the night. —B.C.