

Where it Never Rains

By David Mackintosh
Golfing Traveler for Tuesday 23 March 2004

“It never rains in Ponce,” the elder gentleman said and he should know. The great-great-grandson of one of those Spanish conquistadors of Puerto Rico and a wealthy man owning rum distilleries and other interesting stuff he’s also one of the people about to make Ponce as well known for golf as San Juan is today.

In fact let’s be clear, it does rain from time to time in Ponce. But not a lot. This thriving cultural and economic nexus on the south side of the island is so well protected by the central mountain range that most of the rain driven in by the prevailing easterlies gets caught up and wrapped around the hillsides so although one can actually see plenty of rain *from* Ponce very little, usually just a misting, lands on the town itself.

My knowledgeable informant explains that, even although the Spanish-American war ended in 1898, many of the customs, practices and laws date back to the Spanish colonial era, including water rights.

“The way it worked was that for all river water, that’s to say water running off the mountains, the King of Spain decreed that landowners would be allowed a certain allocation and that is still exactly how it works today. And because it never rains in Ponce, having access to river-hill water is essential for industry, and naturally the new golf course.”

That course is the new Costa Caribe Resort, a twenty-seven hole layout that is simply stunning and with a five-star Hilton hotel just five shuttle-minutes away plus casino, this is certainly soon to be one of the top golfing attractions in the entire Caribbean region.

Bordering an ultramarine sea and using the latest in paspalum-grass technology (that’s the grass that actually thrives on salty water and uses considerably less water than conventional golf course grasses such as Bermuda or bent) last week Costa Caribe was given a test-drive by a bunch of top professionals in the first Puerto Rico Open for thirty-seven years and guess what – the golf course won, hands down - Rodolfo Gonzalez’s winning four day total a well-earned 6-under par - and that by finishing birdie-par-birdie on the last day.

Admittedly a good deal of the challenge comes from the almost constant wind, in fact in some respects it is rather like playing golf on Scottish links-land but with three distinct advantages. Bright sun, blue skies – and of course, it never rains in Ponce.

Oddly enough, in these days of million-dollar golf course designers, this fine example of rolling land, expert shaping and creative use of artificial lakes comes without a name tag at all, simply an in-house design by the hotel’s golf-projects people.

Known as the Pearl of the South, Ponce is Puerto Rico’s second largest city, population around two hundred thousand and founded by Juan Ponce de Leon’s great grandson in 1692. In the past the main reason to visit Ponce would have been February Carnival or to

see the site in nearby Arroyo where Sam Morse installed Latin America's first telegraph.

This Costa Caribe Resort will change all that. With a luxurious clubhouse near completion and a village complex of townhouses and apartments already roofed and soon to be occupied, this is one of finest hidden gems I have come across during recent travels.

What's special is the course has a little of everything. Some long-slog par fives, but a couple that run with the prevailing wind and therefore allow us to boast of our phenomenal power, a few dainty par-fours that are teasingly almost reachable, but woe betide you if you don't catch the tee-shot exactly as planned. There is a delightful mix of par-threes and the fourteenth is a true stunner. The tee is high, the green is surrounded by water and it plays a moderate one hundred and eighty yards.

This is no TPC where the slightest error is full disaster. The green is enormous, enough landing area in front and behind so that a slight error is only slightly penalized. It is a hole with picture postcard elegance, the on-facing pilings shaped so that combined with a long Japanese-style bridge, there's a hint of the Orient in the air.

So this fourteenth sounds easy, right? Well, the real problem is it plays straight into the prevailing wind and as you stand on the high tee with the green below, the visual effect of the water is several times more intimidating than the distance suggests. In all one of these holes that is truly a memorable experience that you'll play over and over in the mind as you fall asleep to the whisper of Caribbean breakers outside your bedroom.

Very occasionally great courses come the *Golfing Traveler's* way, such as the splendid Randall Thompson design in Uruguay's town of Carmelo. The Costa Caribe is now right up at the top-end of my best-in-the-region listing. When its completely finished, a few holes of the complex still have to be fully grassed in, this really is your dream golf vacation venue.

Ponce is an hour and a half drive from San Juan and if planning a trip be sure to hire a car, booked in advance, as there seems to be a scarcity during holiday times. Unless you have no other choice, a cab ride is not a good idea. The fare is one hundred and twenty US dollars and Mr. Cabbie also expects a lavish tip for having taken him far from home.

Playing a composite eighteen for the Puerto Rico Open also gave rise to an unfortunate incident. Leader for the first three days, Mike SanFilippo decided to head off to a small patch of land behind the hospitality tents to warm up his short game, rather than drive down to the full practice facility. Unfortunately he did not check with the rules officials first. That piece of land was technically part of the golf course and he thus landed himself with a two-stroke penalty - exactly the margin by which he lost the title to Gonzalez.