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Nicklaus in NIRVANA

The Jack Nicklaus Mexican “golf trail”
is well worth the journey.

• BY TOM BEDELL •



One&Only Palmilla Resort

Jack Nicklaus, a fisherman who played golf for a living, used to amble south of the border, down the Baja California Sur peninsula, to throw a line into the waters off the southern tip, a 20-mile corridor where the Pacific Ocean meets the Sea of Cortez. Then, almost 40 years ago, Cabo San Lucas was a remote village known for its good fishing and little else.

Fishermen still flock to Cabo. But so do hoards of golfers, mainly due to the design work of that angler, Nicklaus. The first of Jack and Nicklaus Design's work in Latin America was in Cabo, the Palmilla Golf Club, and it was the start of something big for the region, the country and the company. Plenty of other fine courses and designers have followed in Jack's wake, but he still rules the roost. With his most recent—and perhaps most spectacular—course, Quivira in Cabo, Nicklaus has now done six courses in the region and 25 throughout Mexico, with more prospects currently under discussion.

A traveler could fashion a long career out of playing nothing but Nicklaus

courses, and it would rarely be disappointing. But here's a surefire checklist of five Nicklaus tracks in Mexico that will be eye-opening for any golfer.

It all started with the **Palmilla Golf Club** (palmillagc.com) in San Jose del Cabo, which opened in 1992-93 and put the area on the resort map. It has since become a magnet for golf, fishing, luxury hotels and high-end residential communities. It's worth reflecting that before Nicklaus began moving dirt here, about 5,000 rounds of golf were played yearly on the area's one nine-hole municipal course (which still exists), and five flights a day came into Cabo. Now daily inbound flights are up to 100 even in summer, and annual rounds are measured in the hundreds of thousands.

The 27-hole routing at Palmilla may have been surpassed by subsequent Nicklaus designs, but not enough to push it off the must-play list. Add the Troon-managed course to the want-to-stay coupling at the One&Only Palmilla resort—a virtual last word in lotus-eating glamor along one of the best swimmable beaches in the area—and the deal

is sealed.

The intrigue at Palmilla is the differing character of the three nines. The Arroyo and Mountain nines came first, proving so popular that Nicklaus returned to add the Ocean nine in 1997. All are aptly named, though we're basically talking desert golf in all cases (Cabo has always put out a West Coast vibe), with only the par-4 third hole on the Ocean nine reaching down to the Sea of Cortez, albeit in stunning manner.

That the **Ocean Course at the Cabo del Sol** (cabodelsol.com) residential resort community has seven seaside holes is what elevated it to the top of the Nicklaus international rankings list after its 1994 opening, and it has remained his top-rated Mexican course ever since (though Quivira is now giving it a serious chase). It's difficult to say what is more spectacular here—the routing of the course or the scenic backdrop. As a package it's irresistible, and makes one's camera an essential piece of equipment.

But with cliffside tee shots over sandy coves, doglegs around craggy outcroppings and what Nicklaus called the best

three-hole stretch in his portfolio (16-18), players had best pay attention to what they're doing.

As good as the course and its home stretch were, Nicklaus returned in 2010 to polish the gem, reworking holes five through seven to produce a remarkable three-hole span, including the back-to-back par-3s at six and seven, the latter playing right down to the beach. (Other critics have called the tandem as good a par-3 pairing as 15-16 at Cypress Point.) The entire sequence, with water crashing on the nearby shore and winds swirling off the sea, may rival the lauded finish.

There's also a back-to-back par-3 sequence at the **Nicklaus Pacifico Course at the Punta Mita Resort** (fourseasons.com) on mainland Mexico's west coast, about 40 minutes north of the Puerto Vallarta airport. Both of them are the third hole. Eh? The regular third, 3A, is a tough enough par 3 over a marsh. But the extra (and optional) 3B, known as the Tail of the Whale hole, plays to a natural island that throws shade on the famous island green at Sawgrass. So that's 19 holes for your money at Paci-



fico, which is probably a bundle, since the course is open only to residents or guests at either the Four Seasons or St. Regis resorts.

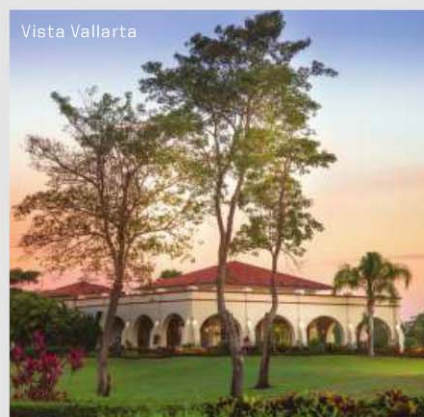
But Nicklaus ups the ante at Pacifico anyway, with eight seaside holes along the Pacific or Banderas Bay. Not to mention another track altogether, Bahia, which opened in 2009. The pair of courses more than doubles the experience and leads to healthy debate—at the multitude of drinking and dining options at the resorts—over which course is preferable. Bahia is unquestionably more difficult, more rolling from tee to green, but both have equivalently lovely water views and the Sierra Madre mountains as a backdrop.

Any time would be a good time to be at Punta Mita, but gourmands might want to pencil in Nov. 30 to Dec. 2, 2017, for the seventh Punta Mita Gourmet and Golf Classic extravaganza. Event participants are rendered virtually senseless, happily enough, with ever-flowing food and drink and golf.

In between his work on the two Punta Mita courses, Nicklaus returned to Puerto Vallarta to create **Vista Vallarta** (clubcorp.com) in 2001. Distinctly more of a mountain than an ocean course, though with views of the entire Bay of Banderas, the course was promptly embraced as tournament-worthy. It hosted the EMC World Cup in 2002; the course record of 62 was set in the third round by some guy named Phil Mickelson, so visitors have that to shoot for.

They'll also be shooting over numerous arroyos and creeks, negotiating abrupt changes in elevation and trying to skirt palm and ficus trees and scads of strategically placed bunkers. Clearly Mickelson must have been using plenty of strength, muscle and jungle work to hack his way to a 62.

The par-3 ninth hole is a particularly nasty bit of business, an island green of sorts, surrounded by dense foliage that would foil the hardest ball retriever. Pretty to look at with the backdrop of the Sierra Madre mountains, but treachery all around. You may not need any



badges, but a few extra golf balls might help, especially if you want to play the adjacent Tom Weiskopf-designed course, both ClubCorp properties.

When the new Nicklaus course opened in Cabo at the end of 2014, it was apparent that the **Quivira Golf Club** (quiviraclub.com) was going to give the Ocean Course a run for its money. The two are already tied in some golf rankings, but Quivira is still young and likely to evolve more as the master-planned community of Quivira Los Cabos continues to flower under the umbrella of Pueblo Bonito Oceanfront Resorts and Spas—meaning the off-course amenities here are as lush as the fairways.

But there's no question that this is a stunner of a golf course, ranging from sea-level holes, through desert corridors and up vertiginous cliffs with one spectacular vista after another. The switch-back cart ride from the fourth hole to

the fifth may be one of the longest (10 minutes) and most elevated (285 feet) in all of golf. When one almost arrives at the fifth tee, it's first time for a snack at one of four comfort stations along the way, although "snack" doesn't quite do justice to the spread at hand.

The fifth and sixth holes at Quivira are bound to spark the most conversation—a play-it-safe iron tee shot on the par 4 or a go-for-broke drive that would have to curve out over the ocean to find the potentially reachable green. Followed by a dizzying downhill par 3, one could easily draw into the watery depths. Yet while the course looks as fearsome as any Nicklaus course, it's actually eminently playable.

It's tempting to say we've saved the best for last with Quivira, but the usual advice prevails: Play them all. And when golf fatigue sets in? You can always go fishing. **MG**