

TEEING OFF

CABO ON THE UPSWING

New and improved golf courses in Los Cabos, Mexico—including Tiger Woods's design debut—are adding to the southern Baja peninsula's greens appeal. **BY THOMAS DUNNE**

In 1897, Horace Hutchinson, a two-time British Amateur golf champion-turned-journalist, published what could be described as the game's first coffee-table book. *British Golf Links* is notable for its photography—scores of striking images that give us a clear idea of what Victorian-era golf was like. In a word, it was rough. On holes like “Sandy Parlour” at England's Royal Cinque Ports or “The Maiden” at Royal St. George's, the line between golf course, beach and broken

ground was provisional and at times blurred beyond recognition.

The book's ancient images came to mind while teeing off on the par-five 17th hole of the Dunes Course at **Diamante** (private; greens fee upon request; Boulevard Diamante s/n Col. Los Cangrejos, Cabo San Lucas; 866-901-1456; diamantecabosanlucas.com), a private golf and real estate community just north of Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Winds were heavy, and the agitated air gave a sense that the ribbon of fairway unfurling on the far side of the

beach might be a mirage. The green seemed impossibly distant, an Alhambra on a high ridge, its approach guarded by serrated slopes. Many great holes have been built all over the world in the past two decades, a time marked by creativity in golf architecture not seen since the interwar period. But few feel as timeless—even mystical—as the 17th at Diamante.

The Dunes Course, which was created by the PGA Tour star Davis Love III, opened in 2009. It's easy to see why it has since

received widespread acclaim. Besides the aforementioned 17th, holes like the long par-three second, with its green surrounded by an amphitheater of sand, endure in the memory. Diamante's duneland is as spectacular as any of the famed links of the UK. The back nine should come to be regarded as one of the world's best B sides, especially when one considers that it's still evolving. This year the club will replace the 12th and 13th—a pair of so-so inland holes that broke up the rhythm of the round—with two more strand-side marvels on land that wasn't available when the routing was planned eight years ago.

The flurry of new development at the Dunes is exciting, but the biggest story at Diamante is that of Tiger Woods. Following a couple of high-profile false starts—one in Dubai, the other in the North Carolina mountains—the past-and-present world no. 1 is on track to reveal **El Cardonal**, his design debut, at Diamante in October. Paul Cowley, the codesigner of the Dunes, who has stayed on to project-manage the construction on behalf of Tiger Woods Design, led us on a recent site tour.

El Cardonal's topography is quite different from that of the Dunes. It's set mostly on the higher ground of a long, gently sloping hillside. Scored by arroyos and studded with a diverse array of trees and cacti, it feels like more of a traditional desert course, albeit one with grand ocean views.

"Pay attention to the greens,"

Cowley said as we trundled down the first hole in a golf cart. "They have a ton of variety in both their shapes and sizes." Sure enough, there is a kidney bean, a punch bowl, a butterfly and, at the par-four seventh, a shape-shifting slipper. The 13th, with slightly squared-off edges, called to mind the geometric style of Seth Raynor. Cowley also pointed out that because Woods's putting surfaces lack bold contours, the club could readily bring them to tournament speed. It remains to be seen how they will play when finished, but

interesting greens are the heart and soul of every good golf course, and here there is a lot of potential.

The bunkering scheme is noteworthy in a similar vein. Woods, true to his Orange County roots, has expressed an admiration



THE BIG NEWS AT DIAMANTE: TIGER WOODS IS ON TRACK TO REVEAL HIS DESIGN DEBUT IN OCTOBER.

for the "Old California" style of Golden Age architects like Billy Bell and George Thomas (Riviera, Bel-Air, Los Angeles Country Club). At El Cardonal, this translated into grass-faced hazards with swooping capes and bays. The trailing edges of these are often banked up to allow them to pop visually. It's a glamorous look, but the Woods team deployed it with restraint. In a couple of instances, bunkers that would conventionally be placed greenside float freely some 20 yards short of the green complex—a trick Donald Ross and other

old-school designers loved to break out to fox a golfer's depth perception.

Woods and his design associates, Beau Welling and Shane Robichaud, have waited a long time for this opportunity. It's safe to predict that El Cardonal will be a good golf course, but there's also a sense that the group's priority was not so much to make a grand statement as to experiment with looks, with shapes and strategies, with the basic idea of how a Tiger Woods golf course might feel. And that's fine; architects from A.W. Tillinghast to Pete Dye took a similar approach in their early work. It's all a part of finding one's own voice as a designer.

Diamante exists in splendid isolation about 20 minutes outside town; those looking to make a base along the tourist corridor would do well to consider **Esperanza** (rooms, from \$595; Ctra. Transpeninsular, km. 7, Manzana 10, Punta Ballena; 855-331-2226; esperanzaresort.com). The Auberge resort's suites are designed to draw guests onto the balcony to soak in ocean views and the dramatic rock formations of the Arch of Cabo San Lucas. This task is comfortably accomplished while neck-deep in the bubbling waters of one of the private infinity-edge hot tubs. The public areas are built around a series of *palapas*, open-air huts where guests can enjoy a margarita or a romantic dinner. The spa, considered one of the best in Latin America, is a place where time blissfully evaporates.

Esperanza's levels of comfort and service are such that simply leaving the property requires an act of will, but those who manage to pry themselves away will find Cabo's reigning-kingpin course just around the corner. Jack Nicklaus's Ocean Course at **Cabo del Sol** (greens fee, from \$260; Ctra. Transpeninsular, km. 10.3, Cabo San Lucas; 866-231-4677; cabodelsol.com) is resort golf at its very best, a layout with one entertaining and photogenic hole after another. The manicured eye candy is a complement to the wild and untamed Diamante. The routing shifts moods constantly. The par-four 11th, featuring two fairways, is tempting and

quirky. It's followed by a par five defined by tough-guy posturing, as the approach must vault over an army of bunkers to gain the elevated green. The course also boasts a superb collection of par threes. The fantasy-calendar 17th is the most famous, but it might actually be the least best of the four. A pair of terrific beachside one-shot holes, the sixth and seventh, emerged as part of a 2010 renovation, while the 13th, playing some 200 yards across a native desert area and then an active arroyo fronting the green, presents one of the most heroic shots.

Diamante and Cabo del Sol have two neighboring developments that are crossing the finish line after being stalled by the financial blah-blah of 2008. Both intend to be private, real-estate-driven facilities, but it's worth checking to see if they might be amenable to hosting an interested party. Two miles east of Cabo del Sol is **Chileno Bay Golf and Beach Club** (private; greens fee upon request; Ctra. Transpeninsular, km. 15, Rancho El Tule, Cabo San Lucas; 858-964-0818; chilenobayclub.com), a Tom Fazio design. The course is open after having spent half a decade in a purgatorial state of near completion, during which time local insiders played enough partial rounds to speculate that it will join Baja's elite. Then there's **Quivira Golf Club** (private; greens fee, from \$150; Ctra. Transpeninsular, km. 0, Cabo San Lucas; 800-990-8250; quiviraloscabos.com), next door to Diamante—or, rather, above it. The club, which opens this summer, sports a Jack Nicklaus layout that tumbles around wind-swept, 150-foot-high sea cliffs.

All the expansions and improvements continue to up the region's golf cachet, but the destination itself is also broadening its reach. A gleaming new terminal at San Jose del Cabo International Airport is designed to handle big birds arriving from the East Coast (Aeromexico is even toying with opening the first direct route from J.F.K. airport), making access to Los Cabos and its sterling golf scene easier than ever. ♦

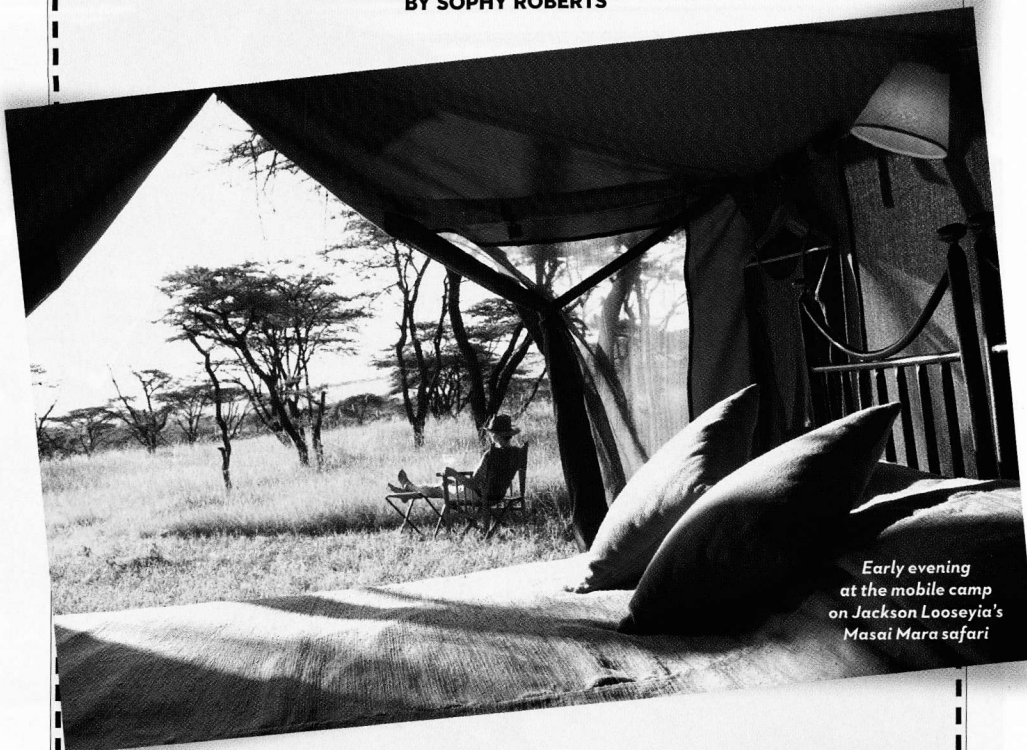
BUYING INTO DIAMANTE

The 1,500-acre Pacific Ocean property offers fractional ownership starting at \$100,000 a week. Full ownership of lots starts at \$350,000. Besides golf, there is a ten-acre saltwater-pool park, as the ocean is unswimmable due to cold temperatures and dangerous undertows. A hotel is in development. diamantecabosanolucas.com.

SAFARI UPDATE: KENYA

A new Masai Mara mobile camp worth noting.

BY SOPHY ROBERTS



Early evening at the mobile camp on Jackson Looseyia's Masai Mara safari

MASAI HERDBOY—turned—superguide Jackson Looseyia has launched a new mobile safari in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve. His right-hand man is spotter Mpatinga, who is part of Kenya's Ndorobo hunter-gatherer tribe—and part of the 2011 YouTube clip "Men Stealing Meat from Lions," in which BBC cameras captured him walking confidently into a pride of 15 feeding lions. (Google it.) Together the remarkable pair reveal lions, leopards and other big game on well-appointed camping trips (complete with authentic canvas tents and exceptional bush cooking) through the northern reaches of the reserve, which other outfits don't penetrate. They also provide deep perspective on Mara history and politics, making their safari the 100 percent Masai experience now topping our list of mobile offerings in Africa. Looseyia's safari can be booked through Natural World Safaris for \$5,275 a person based on four adults and a five-night minimum stay (including return flights from Nairobi); 866-357-6569; naturalworldsafaris.com. ♦