

teedoff

Sweet Greens

AN AMERICAN WAS BUYING A SLEEVE OF balls in the pro shop at the El Conquistador in Puerto Rico. He pulled a \$20 bill out of his wallet, and then stopped.

“You accept dollars here?” he asked.

The pro-shop guy smiled. “*Sí, señor,*” he said.

“Do they take them anywhere on the island?” was his next question.

“*Sí, señor,*” said the pro-shop guy. To his credit, he didn’t roll his eyes. I did it for him.

Some people apparently aren’t aware that the island of Puerto Rico is a self-governing commonwealth that is part of the United States of America—no passport required for entry, and U.S. currency is the legal tender. It’s not a state, exactly, and it’s not independent, exactly; it’s a commonwealth. And if one judges a place by the number of new and improved golf courses it offers, well, Puerto Rico’s wealth is uncommonly overflowing.

When Christopher Columbus sailed into the large natural port on the island’s northern coast in 1493, he named the island St. John (San Juan) and gave the harbor the hopeful name of “rich port,” or Puerto Rico. Somehow, the two names got switched over the centuries. No matter for travelers dragging clubs along; Puerto Rico, the island, offers riches galore.

For many years, the sport’s apex in Puerto Rico was found at the Dorado Beach Resort on the crashing shore some 45 minutes west of San Juan. In 1958, Laurence Rockefeller built the quiet, low-slung villas along the beach and hired Robert Trent Jones to build two courses on land that was once tropical forests and citrus groves. To run the pro shop and help keep the guests entertained, Rockefeller hired two local guys who had started as caddies: Juan Gonzales and Juan “Chi-Chi” Rodriguez. The latter went from trick-shot demonstrations to stardom on the PGA Tour.

Rodriguez has now opened one of Puerto Rico's newest golf courses, El Legado (The Legacy), located in Guayama, the "City of Witches" on the island's dry, southeastern coast. The bewitching course is intended to be Chi-Chi's version of Bay Hill, Arnold Palmer's course in Orlando, with Rodriguez's memorabilia on display in the clubhouse and a boutique hotel planned for the near future. But, he says, the course will not be as hard as Arnie's.

Built in an open plain that was formerly a sugar plantation, the course offers plenty of room and plenty of places to get in trouble, with ponds, bunkers, and palms at every corner. What it doesn't have is a 13th hole; the superstitious Chi-Chi skipped that number, so the course goes from 12 to 14 and ends on the 19th hole. No. 19, by the way, is a healthy par-5 with an island green. Cold libations are available on the terrace at the "20th hole," from which the Caribbean Sea can be spied.

Just a few miles west on the southern coast is the pretty city of Ponce, filled with gorgeous colonial architecture, an excellent art museum, and a widely admired rococo firehouse. The Ponce Hilton resort, on the town's outskirts, was for years a businessman's hotel until it was surrounded with 27 holes of golf in the Costa Caribe development. It is now transforming itself into a golf resort.

Costa Caribe was designed by Bruce Besse Jr., the in-house architect of Southworth Development, an offshoot of the Reebok sneaker company which has been hyperactive of late in Puerto Rican golf. Besse used drought-resistant seascap paspalum grass on the course, which opened for play in May 2003. The three nines are playable in three 18-hole combinations, and two of the nines end with holes tucked against the sea.

Besse worked with PGA Tour star Tom Kite to design the four nines at the Coco Beach Golf Resort in Rio Grande, about 35 minutes east of San Juan. Built in the shadow of El Yunque, the cool, mountainous rain forest, the setting here is lush and green. The four nines are named Palm, Lakes, Ocean, and Mountain; the names pretty much describe the terrain.

Though Coco Beach was designed mainly as a resort course, Kite insisted on adding movement to the greens, which makes for some fun—except for those who think three-putting every hole is less than fun. No matter; the dining in the expansive clubhouse is excellent, and the nearby Paradisus Resort offers all-suite accommodations with beautiful views.

Several years ago, Florida architect Jon Sanford designed and built the Caguas Real Golf Club in the hilly city of Caguas, above San Juan. It's now managed by Four Points Sheraton, which has opened a new resort hotel and casino there.

Back where it all started, at Dorado Beach, Hyatt Corporation asked Raymond Floyd to overhaul the four courses stretched out along the coastline. Floyd tweaked the two Dorado courses, reversing the nines on the East Course (that dagnabbed, double-dogleg par-5 is now the fourth) and adding length and new bunkers to the West, and Hyatt kicked in a new clubhouse.

Down the beach at the former Hyatt Cerromar Beach—now the Hyatt Hacienda del Mar—the old North and South courses are now the Ocean and Plantation courses and are each longer, reshaped slightly, and tougher. And each course still has at least one hole that visits the beach.

And that's just the new stuff in this commonwealth of golf. The rest of the island's golf is still *el primo*: the two courses at the Westin Rio Mar, including the excellent Greg Norman River course that plays over and along the Mameyes River coursing down from El Yunque; the fun Arthur Hills course at the spectacular El Conquistador Resort, where the cliff-top views of the Fajardo harbor are spectacular; and the two playful courses at Palmas del Mar, a pretty, residential area and resort on the eastern shore.

Do they all accept dollars? Sí, señor, and plenty of them! With the strong tourist traffic from the mainland, as well as a growing cadre of homegrown golfers, greens fees are creeping steadily north. But where else in the U.S. and environs can you find such guaranteed fun in the sun with a Spanish accent?

A.G. Pollard Jr., who made straight Cs in high school Spanish, always enjoys amusing the natives with his linguistic skills. His basic strategy? Put an "o" on the end of every word and shout.