

The Mexican Phishing Trip

By Nico Earhart

It wasn't golf that brought me to within a taxi's drive of the Mayakoba golf course on the Mexican Riviera, but I figured as long as I was in the neighborhood, I might as well take a couple laps around the course. The PGA tour makes a yearly stop on this angelic course each November during the wrap-around portion of the season – the local daytime highs hover in the mid 70s and the placid, chalk-blue ocean waves lap along the Caribbean shore behind the 15th while I'm curled up and greeting our first flakes of snow. The original reason for the trip was to soak in a three-day concert for the rhythmically charged and devotee-inspiring band Phish, who were playing down the road. Some might hint at the bacchanalian nature of their shows, but I was there for the Music, and little golf on the side.

Leaving Denver, we passed over the snow-blanketed Rocky Mountains as the jet eased into the climb and sped towards the Tropic of Cancer. I decided to get to Mexico a day early, attempting to sneak onto the course prior to the start of the weekend's festivities, but as my dreadlocked co-passengers boarded the plane at Denver International, I figured my idea of a quiet and inconspicuous arrival into the Cancun airport would allude me. The strange, confused glances came from Mexicans and the Americans alike, as I schlepped my oblong golf luggage out to a waiting yellow bus that looked like a Valencian bull lowering its head for the charge. The beads of sweat quickly melted through my cap as the tropic humidity penetrated to the marrow of my bones, my blood still cold and clotted from the months of chill that had stagnated over my

town. It would take me a few hours to get used to the abrasive and sultry climate of the Yucatán, but it was a welcome change from the frost-bitten clarity of Colorado.

As the shuttle barreled down the highway, passing through the resort town and surrounding comminutes of Playa Del Carmen, I stole a short glimpse of the ivory walls that marked the entrance to the Rosewood Mayakoba resort, the concaved black, vertical lettering between the white pillars spilling down on to the crushed coral deck, and planned my return for the next day.

The blueprint was to play the Camaleón course twice during the weekend, once by myself Wednesday before shows began and again on Sunday during a tournament put on as a part of the Phish concert. Figuring it would behoove me to check the layout once before the tournament, I booked a morning tee time and headed to the resort in a taxi from the Hard Rock, confabulating in Spanish with my driver as we skirted the Atlantic on the coastal highway. Arriving at the course and passing through the shaded groves of trees, crossed by venetian canals that snaked their way around the hotel, I found the course empty and was told to tee off at my leisure. The wind had picked up and carried with it low-hanging swaths of tropical clouds that lined up to the far horizon of the Gulf. A verdant jungle surrounds the course and is interspersed with the stunted clusters of mangroves, where the sea had wound its way inland through the porous limestone, allowing them to swell up around greenery of the course. Anyone who has watched the tournament here knows there is a paramount importance placed on holding the fairways, or risking lost balls and wasted strokes. Center cut shots were rewarded with tricky, but manageable shots to well protected greens with their bleached-white sand traps, but any

deviation was punished, harshly – the thick, impenetrable forest is where golf balls go to die.

I ambled my way through the track, playing a few of the feature holes twice given the absents of other players. Of the five shots I hit from the tee box on the 15th, the hole made famous by its beach-backed green and constant spotlight during the professional play, three of them managed to find the green, although one seemed to catch a slanted wind and headed deceptively close to a group of vacationers strolling their way up the sand. This could have been one of the best Par-3s I've played in my life, although the straight forwardness of the hole is masked by the elevated setting of beauty in which it is placed. The 10th hole, with its steep drop into a crystalline *cenote*, like a pristine sheet of glass to the right of the green, was in my opinion the best hole on the course, although the canal-sided 17th was no slouch either. I finished my round and made my way back south to meet up with a friend who had arrived during my round to catch the shows with me.

The next two days were reserved for music as my companion and I made our way each night, barefooted and in swim trunks to see the band perform on the beachfront stage. Set-breaks in between the music were spent wading into the tepid Ocean. By Sunday morning however, despite a pronounced exhaustion from the lack of sleep, I was raring to make my way back to the course despite the lack of privacy this time as a result of the sixty-person tournament. The group would be an unusual one for a course of this prominence (as many groups associated with Phish shows can be) but that seemed inconsequential; as long as I could get back out. Some of the people seemed a little underprepared for what they were getting themselves into – a tournament round at a PGA quality course – but our group was well-natured and managed to keep our

scores fairly low through the first nine. We even managed to get a shot onto the 15th green that had to be measured for a closest to the pin contest, but found out later my shot hadn't made the grade.

The atmosphere this time was a decidedly casual one, once the nerves of the tournament had worn off. As we made our way around the back nine, the outward section for our group with the shotgun start, we managed to drop a few shots and instead concentrated on taking in the coastal landscape, something I had missed out on during the first round. This round the 18th thrilled me with its narrow, anaconda-shaped fairway and flat panned bunkers like pearl, cast-iron skillet. A highlight off the course, once play had ended, took place when an extremely hydrated phan took the liberty of stealing a golf cart to get back to his hotel, worried that he wouldn't make the show that still wouldn't start for five more hours. Passing through for a second time, I was able to notice some of the finer points on the course; another beach front Par-3 on number seven seemed to stick out; as beautiful as the fifteenth and noticeable more difficult. The group loaded back into their vans to return to the hotels, getting ready for the third night of the incredible music. While the beauty of the course may have been lost by a few of the participants, the Mayakoba will be stuck in the back of my mind as soon as the amber leaves of Denver start to drip from the trees.