

Living the 'Pure Life'

Some American superintendents have discovered Costa Rica to be an enchanting place to tend turf and pursue other interests

BY ANTHONY PIOPPi, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

A round of golf in Costa Rica is a veritable nature tour, what with coatimundi (top) and iguana trekking on the course.

American superintendents Mark Dinan, Don Johnson, Eric Van Gorder and Jay Miller each came to Costa Rica to work but also for the opportunity to explore an exotic country in a far-off locale. While Van Gorder recently moved back to the United States, all four superintendents say the weather, people, scenery and laid-back lifestyle in Costa Rica make it a hard place to leave.

"The main reason I think people stay here for so long is that you just fall in love with this place," says Johnson, former superintendent of Garra De Leon Golf Course at Melia Playa Conchal resort on Costa Rica's central west coast. "The people are the greatest. They are so warm and friendly. You know you live in a great place, with great people who have a positive outlook on life, when the most popular saying here — and you can hear it said at least five times a day — is 'pura vida,' which means pure life."

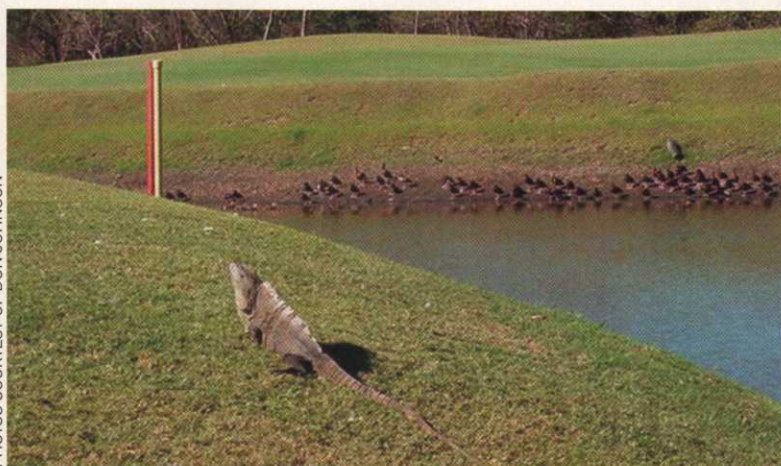
The size of West Virginia, Costa Rica makes up only .01 percent of the world's landmass, but is home to 6 percent of the world's animal and plant species. There are more varieties of moths in Costa Rica than on the entire African continent. The surfing and sport fishing are world-class.

A round of golf in Costa Rica is a veritable nature tour, with an abundance of animals from howler monkeys to iguanas to hundreds of bird species, and astounding flora and fauna on and around the layouts. For Miller, there was another reason to come to Costa Rica.

"I am and will always be a surfer," he says. "When I first got in the golf business, my goal was to have a course near good surf. I hit the jackpot here. There are three great surf breaks on the project, and I built my house on another spot, Playa Grande, that is the best in the country."

Miller has been in Costa Rica for eight years, the last four at Hacienda Pinilla, a golf resort and residential community on the Guanacaste Peninsula. He and his wife have two daughters, Malia

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and Kylee, who were both born in the country.

Miller is senior manager at Hacienda Pinilla resort. He was in charge of building the course, which he did with only his crew. No construction company was involved.

As Playa Grande continues to grow, with three hotels under construction and much more building planned, Miller's duties as head of grounds maintenance for the entire property increases, but that's just fine with him. "I truly feel I have the best job in the world and will be here for as long as they will have me," he says.

Dinan arrived in Costa Rica in 1997 to help build and grow in the first nine holes of Parque Valle Del Sol, just outside of the capital city of San Jose, which opened in 1998. Three years later, the second nine of the residential golf development opened under Dinan's watchful eye. He left the United States for Costa Rica after a golf course he grew in filed for bankruptcy.

"I was in the right place at the right time and the right frame of mind," Dinan says. "I arrived thinking I would be here a year at the most. I stayed because of the challenge and opportunities of trying to build golf courses in Costa Rica."

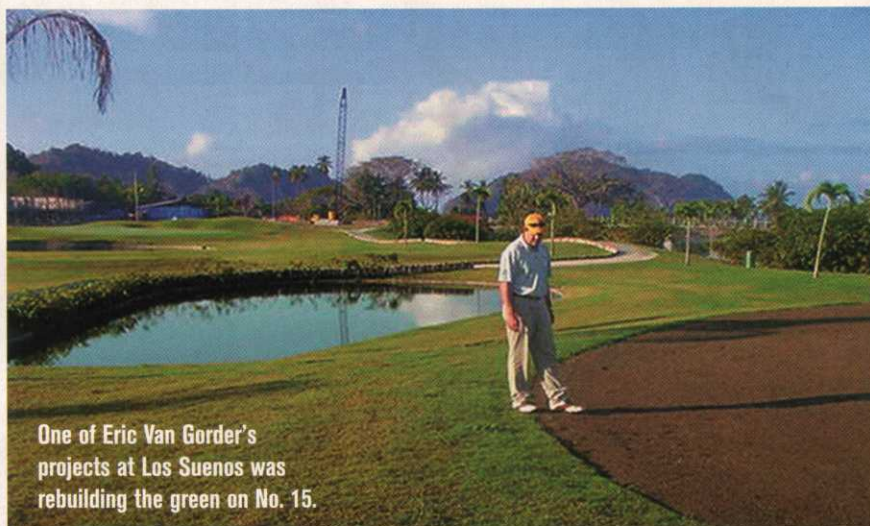
What he called "Third World delays and difficulties" forced him to improvise and to invent solutions.

"When we grew in the course, we had to use an old diesel generator for three-phase power for the pump station, and we had three people turning on sprinklers with keys during the night," he says.

Problems on his course also underscore another reason superintendents love Costa Rica. With no bermudagrass turf farms in Costa Rica, Dinan had a difficult time locating stolons for his course. As a result, the batch used for the front nine was tainted, and he has struggled to keep the grass healthy. In the United States, he invariably would have lost his job at the hands of an unforgiving course owner or membership, but here there are no such pressures — other than the pressure he puts on himself. "I'm my own worst enemy," he says.

It's clear Dinan has fallen in love with his new country. He married a native — referred to as Ticos — named Kathia. She had two sons by a previous marriage. The Dinans also have a young daughter of their own. The two met during construction of the course where Kathia worked as a secretary.

"My Spanish was very bad when I arrived," Dinan says. "I



One of Eric Van Gorder's projects at Los Suenos was rebuilding the green on No. 15.

COURTESY OF ERIC VAN GORDER

was lost without Kathia. She had to translate everything for me. She caught my attention the first day I walked in the office, and the rest is history."

Van Gorder is another fan of Costa Rica. A world traveler, Van Gorder has worked in Vietnam, Cambodia, the Cayman Islands and Belize, among other places.

Van Gorder recently resigned as superintendent from Los Suenos Marriott Ocean and Golf Resort on the northwest coast of Costa Rica to take a job in California at La Mirada Golf Course, run by American Golf Corp.

Van Gorder and his wife, Arelen, who is Nicaraguan, met while both worked in the Cayman Islands. They have two young daughters. "It was time to get back to the United States and raise [them]," Van Gorder says.

Other superintendents may get the opportunity these four have. More golf courses are planned throughout the country.

Johnson, though, has a word of warning for those thinking of taking a job in Costa Rica. "Once you've been here, you don't want to leave," he says.

Johnson left Garra de Leon in April, but wants to remain in Costa Rica. He says Garra de Leon let him go for financial reasons.

Johnson and his wife, Shernaz, want to start a business in Costa Rica and raise their daughter there. "Our daughter was born here, and I would like for her to grow up here," he says.

Maybe Johnson will find another job on a golf course. At Garra de Leon, Johnson says he felt very connected to the course.

"I know most superintendents feel the same about their courses too, but to know Costa Rica and the great biodiversity it has is just amazing," Johnson says. "I wanted to be part of that and protect it." ■



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