

Golf and Luxury in Guatemala: Touring a New Pete Dye Course on the Side of a Volcano

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If Pete Dye can build Whistling Straits from a flat, clay airstrip near Sheboygan, WI then imagine the possibilities if Mr. Dye were given mountainous terrain, active volcanoes, and land overlooking the coastal plain towards the Pacific Ocean. There is no need to imagine, as the Pete Dye Signature design of the Fuego Maya 18-hole golf course at La Reunion Golf Resort and Residences opened just outside of Antigua, Guatemala in January of 2009 (Figure 1).

As part of a University of Wisconsin-Madison class trip to learn about tropical agriculture, UW Emeritus professor Dr. Doug Maxwell set up a side trip for us and his wife, Martha, to tour and learn about golf and golf maintenance in Guatemala. Our guides for the day were La Reunion Superintendent Edgar Marroquin and his mentor and consultant Greg Bozek, an American Superintendent at San Isidro Golf Club in Guatemala City (Figure 2).

As is the case at most golf courses around the world, nothing drives the maintenance at La Reunion more than the weather. At an altitude of 3,500 feet above sea level, the temperature remains remarkably consistent year round with daily highs between 70-80°F and nightly lows between 50-60°F. As Greg so aptly put, "it's where turf goes to heaven."

Other aspects of the climate in Guatemala aren't so consistent, namely the moisture. As in most tropical regions of the world, there aren't four distinct seasons but two; wet and dry. The dry season runs on average from November to April, while the wet makes up the remainder of the year. Because of its perch on a volcano facing the Pacific, La Reunion is subject to the winds blowing moisture off the ocean and then dumping rain as they blow up the side of the volcano. In the rainy season La Reunion averages an astonishing 300 inches of rain, while in the dry season a laughably low 3 inches.

As you would expect, this makes for vastly different irrigation programs in the two seasons. In the dry season, an average of 600,000 gallons of water are pumped per day. While in the wet, the system is run maybe 10 times over a 6 month period. One cost associated with the rainy season that might be a surprise to some is the cost of replacing irrigation parts due to lightening strikes. Since the course opened just over two years ago Edgar and Greg have had to replace 200 decoders, and they now budget \$20,000 per year to replace them.



Figure 1: 'Fuego' makes his, or her, presence known at La Reunion at all times



Figure 2: Our hosts for the day Edgar Marroquin (left) and Greg Bozek (center) posed with Dr. Doug Maxwell.

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Despite being a half world away, many similarities exist between golf course maintenance in Guatemala and Wisconsin. The maintenance shop could pass for any new shop in the U.S. (Figure 3), complete with Jacobsen equipment and staff boards that would make any American superintendent feel at home.

Putting surfaces at La Reunion were seeded to 'L-93', fairways and tees are 'Penncross', and the roughs are a mixture of Kentucky bluegrass and fine fescue. Surprisingly, not a blade of annual bluegrass was found amongst the playing surfaces. Target green speeds are approximately 9.5. Nitrogen fertilization averages 4-4.5 lbs of nitrogen per 1,000 ft² annually, the major disease is dollar spot, and white grubs are the significant insect pest. Throw in the fact that they spray Primo on a weekly basis and I could have described any number of maintenance regimes in Wisconsin and throughout the Midwest.

This isn't to say that maintenance is the same though.



Figure 3: The shop at La Reunion would make nearly any American superintendent envious.

Edgar and Greg have 48 employees at their disposal for an 18 hole golf course, paying a base wage of \$9.00 per day (minimum wage in Guatemala). With 300 inches of rain during the rainy season, excellent drainage is imperative to the quality of the course, and few things can impede drainage the way thatch can. In fact, thatch was the most significant problem encountered once the course opened.

A recommendation from Dick Psolla of Brookside Labs, New Knoxville, OH to use molasses to increase microbial activity in the soil has been extremely effective in reducing their thatch problem. Molasses is a product of sugarcane, which is a major export product of Guatemala and available in abundant (i.e. cheap) quantities just a few miles away. The molasses gets applied to all 18 fairways 4 times per year. Like any good thatch reduction program, topdressing is applied on a consistent basis. One hole is topdressed each day and upon completion of all 18 the process starts again with hole #1.



Figure 4: Tough to miss your tee time when you can beat the traffic by taking your helicopter to the course.

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Figure 5: A portion of the men's locker room at La Reunion.

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Obtaining turf and ornamental pesticides can also be more difficult, as your friendly soft goods representatives are not present in Guatemala. To bring in commonly-used pesticides like Daconil® or Merit®, an import license must be obtained for every single product, which is costly and time consuming. This overbearing process means pesticide applications are truly made only as a last resort, something that probably can't be said for most courses in the U.S. Oh and of course there is the issue of the active volcano, aptly named Fuego (or fire), which spews minor amounts of ash several times per day. According to both Greg and Edgar though, when a large release of ash covers much of the course it makes for great topdressing!

The contrasting styles of management reflected the varied backgrounds of our two hosts. Greg Bozek is an American who came to Guatemala 16 years ago after an invitation from a friend in New York. He oversaw the construction and grow-in at La Reunion, and still consults 2 days per week at the course in addition to his time at San Isidro GC. His style could be construed as old school, using the mantra “don't kill the turf” and preferring not to make it more complicated than that. Edgar Marroquin worked several jobs before entering the United States and obtaining a job at Chevy Chase Golf Club in Maryland.

Upon returning to Guatemala he worked on Greg's maintenance staff, rising to Superintendent following Greg's departure and now working with Greg on a regular basis. Edgar resembles the younger superintendents around today, nearly always responding to the crew and the clubhouse on his cell phone and doing his best to please a wide variety of demands in what is often a very demanding position.

While golf is certainly growing in popularity in many foreign markets, namely in Asia, it is still of relatively minor importance in Guatemala and most of Central America. La Reunion is one of six golf courses in Guatemala, and all cater to a relatively wealthy crowd. With a helipad to accept incoming golfers from Guatemala City an hour away (Figure 4), and a men's locker room that would be the envy of even some of your members (Figure 5), luxury rules at La Reunion.

In a country where a significant proportion of the population lives below the poverty line, pristine fairways and immaculate putting surfaces may seem a foolish waste of resources.



Figure 6: The private pool available in every hotel villa.



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A deeper look, though, shows that this public-private course provides jobs for local workers that pay significantly more than many other jobs available. Luxury in Guatemala can also be had at a relatively affordable price. Rounds of golf are \$150, though the course would easily surpass \$300 green fees in the U.S. Private hotel villas range in price but generally are priced around \$250-300 per night, and include amenities such as your own private pool, an outdoor shower where you can look up at Fuego, and access to the clubhouse facilities with a view from the patio that stretches out towards the Pacific (Figures 6, 7, 8, respectively). If you're looking to get away from another Wisconsin winter, this spot is tough to beat.

Dr. Maxwell and I would like to extend our sincere thanks to both Greg and Edgar for taking time out of their day to educate us and show us around the stunning property. For more information on the course and resort and play packages visit www.lareunion.com.gt/.

Where in the world is Dr. Maxwell?

Much of the Wisconsin turf industry fondly recalls working with Dr. Doug Maxwell for a number of years in the 1990's. It has been over a decade since he ran the UW's Turf Pathology program, and many are likely curious what he has been up to. Dr. Maxwell, Emeritus Professor of Plant Pathology and Interim Turfgrass Pathologist during the late 1990's still enjoys his golf contacts and even keeps up his 5 hole golf course at his farm, which is just a short drive west from the OJ Noer Turfgrass Research Center in Verona, WI. He retired from the university in July 2001 so that he could increase his international research activities supported by the US Agency for International Development

in the Middle East and Central America. These grants focused on breeding tomatoes for tropical plant diseases. During the time of these grants, Dr. Maxwell traveled to Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, The West Bank of Palestine, Jordan, and many trips to Guatemala. From this effort in Guatemala, a small vegetable seed company, Semillas Tropicales S. A., was started in Antigua, Guatemala in 2004 and this company now sells commercial tomato hybrids that have been developed by Doug and his Guatemalan colleagues. His current activities include interactions with other seed companies such as Heinz Seeds and East West Seeds in Thailand. His grandchildren are getting older (11, 11, 13, 13) and he takes them on road trips to see the USA each summer. Nebraska was in 2010 and Colorado will be in 2011. Besides his activities with Tomato Breeding, Doug also serves as the Chair of the Technical and Advisory Committee for a large International grant on cowpeas and beans and this responsibility has taken him to Ecuador and South Africa in 2010.

Needless to say, Dr. Maxwell has kept himself busy since his "retirement." Despite his relatively short time running the UW Turfgrass Pathology program, Dr. Maxwell can still rattle off several golf course superintendents in the state and speaks fondly of his many experiences when he was with the turfgrass program. He wishes his friends the very best; and is especially proud of the turfgrass industry's continued support of the Turfgrass Diagnostic Lab, which he created with support from the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association in 1996. If you look hard at the next Summer Field Day, you just might see him checking out the latest research.



Figure 7: Why shower inside when you can shower outdoors and keep your eye on 'Fuego'



Figure 8: Through much effort, we were able to remove Dr. Maxwell from his perch looking over the valley.