

## Trump Style in Spades

The Donald's redesign of Pete Dye's waterfront resort course was definitely worth the wait.

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Many people take shots at Donald Trump. After all, he's an easy target, what with the accent, the swagger, the hair... and his talking points of building the Best This and the Biggest That and spending the Most Money Here and There.

But what most of Trump's critics fail to admit once it's all over but the firing is that, more often than not, Donald Trump delivers. He is a man willing to risk spectacular failure in the pursuit of absolute greatness. And he delivers in grand fashion... with the Best This and the Biggest That while spending the Most Money Here and There.

Trump National Golf Club, Los Angeles, is one such delivery.

And while the businessman-turned-television-star's moniker seems to be inscribed on everything these days, it's entirely appropriate on the course formerly known as Ocean Trails.

Because the transformation of Pete Dye's blufftop track into the Donald J. Trump signature design on which the LPGA will tee it up as September turns into October is among the best redesigns ever in the West, right up there with friend Tom Fazio's recent erasure of The Desert Inn to make way for the memorable and much more spectacular Wynn Golf Club in Las Vegas.

"We took an average, nice course on a spectacular location and created a truly special golf course on a spectacular site," Trump says.

Of course, the former could be debated – average yes, but far from nice. Fairways & Greens was never a fan of the original Dye design, with its tight, overly penal landing areas, poor sightlines and hidden hazards. That the Earth tried to swallow the 18th hole seemed only fitting. It was a good walk spoiled.

But the original investors' nightmare has become an oceanfront dream come true for golfers willing to pony up a few presidents.

And it's worth every penny, especially if you're a player who pays similar prices for Las Vegas courses that have neither the sea nor the scenery that swirl around this National treasure.

The Trump treatment begins on the opening hole, which has been elevated from one of the worst 4-pars in the West to one of the better short two-shotters around. The layup landing area is generous compared to the tight green, and thundering waterfalls cascade behind the hole and into a pond that must be carried on the approach. Using the area's natural Palos Verdes stone, some of which was moved from other spots in the Dye design, the new water features at No. 1 and No. 17 never feel artificial. Instead, the rushing whitewater creates an energetic, almost surreal solitude on the greens.

Throughout the course, Trump opened up the fairways by removing large swaths of the natural vegetation. At the same time, he added new definition to each corridor with flashed white-sand bunkers, now guiding players off the tee boxes that before left golfers guessing.

Along the routing, he also returned a few holes to their rightful lengths, making 3-pars out of ill-fitted 4-pars and lengthening other holes to create proper landing areas from all sets of tees.

And then there's the magnificent 18th, a manmade wonder of infrastructure beneath the bunker-dotted emerald fairway. "There was a slight problem with the 18th hole," Trump likes to joke. "It fell into the ocean." Yet today, you'd never know the hole's history, and the result is a piece of land so stable that Trump says he wants to be standing on the 18th hole when the Big One hits California.

It's also a Trump-size, par-4 finishing hole, complete with a "tower" of a back tee box on the ocean side of the 17th green, more than 500 yards from the final green. With ocean breezes involuntarily shaping your shots, mere mortals should feel lucky to find their drives, let alone have reasonable fairway-wood shots to the green. Certainly, we don't suggest the tips for 90 percent of the players out there, but we do believe Trump's 18th tee box is a long walk and big shot every player should give a rip at least once.

But the true triumph of Trump National isn't in the length or technology or wizardry. It's not the white sand or waterfalls. No, it's something far less tangible and far more meaningful - it's the collection of 18 holes, and all that surrounds them, melding into one singular, memorable experience, like the brushstrokes of a painting, each carefully chosen and individual in their own right up close, yet bringing into focus an unforgettable image as you step back and allow yourself to enjoy.

This place is about golf, not tourism. Even with its over-the-top temptations, National is more Bandon Dunes than Las Vegas, more Spyglass Hill than Pebble Beach.

And if its outdoor spaces have occupied the largest share of the owner's onsite time, its indoor spaces have quietly undergone a transformation of their own. By the time the vaguely Mediterranean-styled clubhouse is complete next year, it will fit well with Trump's vision of giving patrons a deep sense of

opulence without overwhelming the building's true draw: the Pacific sprawled out from every possible vantage point.

The Pro Shop is straightforward and even understated by Trump standards (though his name adorns virtually every product, from TaylorMade staff bags to cashmere sweaters), and the sports lounge area is replete with the flat-screen TVs, comfy leather chairs and the light, casual atmosphere you'd expect at any high-end public golf course.

But this is a Trump property, and he couldn't help but apply hints of his gilded New York sensibility here and there. His gold coat-of-arms logo is posted above each main doorway and echoed in certain design elements – sconces in the hallways, pillars in the sunswept convention spaces and, most intricately and eloquently, in the pressed gold leaf ceiling above what promises to be one of the Southland's finest upscale restaurants.

"We're excited about the new restaurant upstairs," says Kevin Aidukas, Trump National's executive chef for the past five years. "It's going to be a lot of fun."

That sense of getaway-for-a-day fun has pervaded this place since the beginning, since pre-Trump days, when the Zuckerman family owned Ocean Trails. The clubhouse is now a part of many an Angeleno's dining-out rotation.

Breakfast is the golfer's domain, and the fare is hearty though Aidukas dismisses it as nothing special. Still, the bacon is thick and delicious, the sausage is New York plump but SoCal spicy, the eggs Benedict is deftly presented, and General Manager Mike Van der Goes' favorite, Joe's Special – an amalgam of eggs, ground Angus beef and vegetables – is something you could picture Trump himself eating before a round with fellow movers and shakers, especially when you find out what he likes for lunch.

"Honestly, he's probably the easiest man to feed," Aidukas says. "He loves our cheeseburger, he loves our fish and chips, he loves our clam chowder. And he pretty much stays with those three items. He doesn't venture off.

Last week he brought in a group of people from Orange County, I think it was a party of 10, and eight of them had fish and chips. We had this special menu created with veal and Colorado lamb, just a great menu, and they all had fish and chips."

It's ironic that Trump's tastes are so, well, pedestrian in a way. He's from the restaurant capital of the world, he has Aidukas' kitchen at his disposal, yet he sticks with the basics. The rest of us are well advised to delve deeper into Aidukas' menus and experience true culinary magic. The older ladies who fill the tables on virtually every weekday lunch hour certainly know how good the food is.

"The lunch menu changes every day. We try to do whatever's in season, what's freshest, the best produce at each time of year. The menus are constantly changing and we're free to do whatever we want. And I think we do a pretty good job."

One dish that defines Aidukas' whimsical side is simply called the Lunch Box. Residing in its little compartments, bento box-like, could be smoked trout, lobster bisque, seafood rolls, a bit of sushi, whatever strikes the chef's fancy. "People love the Lunch Box, and we do too, because it's more creative stuff we can throw together, small portions," he says. "It's fun to do."

Aidukas manages to meld that lighthearted philosophy with the more serious demeanor of the dinner hour, where classic seafood, beef, lamb and other continental entrees have their place. One can imagine the smile he had on his face when he created a dessert called Trump Tower – a chocolately wonder that so impressed the boss that he flew Aidukas and his wife to his club in Florida for a little R&R, Donald-style. In return, Aidukas continues to work hard to make Trump National one of the best golf course eateries in the West, right up there with Pebble Beach's Club XIX or Roy's at Spanish Bay.

"Our dinner business is actually very good. I've played virtually every course in Southern California, and I always check out their clubhouses and menus. Most places close down at six o'clock after the golfers have gone. But from Day One, we've established that this is a restaurant, it's part of the clubhouse, and it's always done well. It's an amazing property."

And that might just be an understatement, even for a golf club built on hyperbole.

The 350-yard-square driving range is no less awe-inspiring than the rest of Trump National. And, yes, when finished, it could be the Best Practice Facility in the West. Or at least the most scenic, outdueling Orange County's Pelican Hill for ocean-view honors.

As for the 18 holes themselves and Trump's claim that National will be "Better than Pebble Beach" – we still say wait and see. There's a lot of history and character in the sod of 17-Mile Drive, an essence that only time can nurture.

Although, after a quiet, sunny Southern California round with nothing but green under our feet and Pacific blue on the horizon, we can no longer scoff at the mere notion.

As with most of Trump's visions, he'll no doubt find a way to make it so.