

Golf tourism

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Simon and Louise Hudson

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

5 The Management of Golf Tourism

Spotlight: Trump National Los Angeles: The most expensive golf course ever built

Clubhouse at Trump National Los Angeles, photograph by author



Located on the Palos Verdes peninsula south of downtown Los Angeles is the Trump National Golf Club. Donald Trump paid \$27 million for the property in 2002 and then invested \$261 million in redesigning the course. 'This is the most expensive golf course ever built,' he proclaimed. Apart from the wonderful golf course, the club has a 45,000 square foot clubhouse, a pro-shop, two dining options, conference rooms, and a ballroom. A public park sits between the front and back nines providing access to hiking trails. Because it is on the coast, the course is not permitted to go private, so Trump National is the public version of his private clubs elsewhere.

David Conforti is General Manager and Director of Golf at the club. With experience working for Troon Golf and the PGA, Conforti is clearly a highly competent hands-on manager, and speaks openly about the club and its visitors. 'I would say about 30-40 per cent of our visitors are tourists – mainly from other parts of the US, Asia, and Latin America,' he said. 'Corporate golf has been very strong in the past – up to 50 per cent of our business - but 2009 has been slow. Most of our visitors seem to find us through the Internet, but our accolades help.' Trump National has been rated #1 golf course in California by every major western golf publication, ranked #38 in the US by *Golf Magazine*, and recognized as having a 'Top 100 Golf Shop in America' by *Golf World Magazine*.

Trump National also attracts a number of celebrities, which maintains its high profile. Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson are regular visitors, as is soccer star, David Beckham and American football player, Tom Brady. Actor Mark Wahlberg also plays on a regular basis. 'They just want to come here to escape and they are all such nice people,' said Conforti. The club is featured on television programmes

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and in commercials quite frequently. 'The PGA America was here last week (April 2009) filming a commercial, and the latest Michael Jordan commercials for Hanes with Charlie Sheen were shot here,' said Conforti. 'H.B.O.'s Entourage was here last year, and the Golf Channel has been here to film a Big Break instalment. We have also had a number of films made here including Step Brothers with Will Ferrell. We will usually charge a site fee for filming, although for the recent Tee it up with Tiger Woods series, filmed over a two week period here for the Golf Channel, we waived the fees as the exposure it gives us is priceless.'

In terms of operations, golf carts are compulsory on the course and the club has chosen electric over gas. 'We are always concerned about the environment here,' Conforti explained. 'But electric carts are also less noisy. I actually think golf carts are the arteries of a golf club operation. Right now we are considering acquiring a new fleet with a new GPS system that we will lease for four years.' The club does all the servicing itself as it has found it too expensive in the past to outsource. 'We have six maintenance staff on site to take care of any problems with the carts,' he added. Cart presentation is also very important to Conforti: 'Our customers notice if the cart is not clean so we spend 15–20 minutes on each cart every night to ensure it is spotless for the next day's golfers.'

It is not just the golf carts where special attention is paid. From the moment guests arrive, the club's mission is to provide a world class experience. 'We take customer service very seriously,' said Conforti. 'Department heads are usually responsible for training but we also bring in an H.R. advisor to provide customer service training.' The club has 280 staff – about 100 full-time and 180 part-time. Aside from management, there are approximately 35 in maintenance, 30 outside, 10 golf professionals, 30 kitchen staff, 12 club house managers, 30 banquet staff and 50 servers or bussers. Managers will meet once a week to discuss weekly events and activities.

According to Conforti, banquets and events are vital to the business. 'We have about 25 large banquets and 100 weddings per year. Saturday weddings are sold out from March to November. Most people find us through the Internet and once we get them here and show them around, 80–90 per cent of them will sign up on the spot.' The club will customize anything from menus to cakes in order to provide a unique experience for guests. The ballroom has seating for 300, and is adorned with a stately, hand-carved fireplace, impressive French doors to the covered balcony, and elaborate crystal chandeliers. The club also hosts a number of events, such as celebrity poker charity events, monthly jazz expression sessions, an annual car show and wine and beer festivals. 'All these events are a great way to keep the community involved,' said Conforti.

The club has two dining options. The Golfer's Lounge is the more casual of the two restaurants, and Cafe Pacific is more upscale, with gold leaf-painted ceilings. Both have an excellent wine list and creative menus. 'We take great pride in our catering and the restaurant here has an excellent reputation. From Monday to Friday most of the diners are locals which I think is really important. We are after all a member of the community. The food is a little more expensive than anywhere else, but it is topnotch food.'

Chapter extract

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