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# Caribbean Travel

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PUERTO RICO

## Golf resorts up their game

Tourism promoters are counting on new and renovated luxury resorts to drive more affluent crowds to Puerto Rico.



The Gran Melia Puerto Rico Golf Resort and Villas has upgraded from the Paradisus all-inclusive brand to a more upscale Gran Melia hotel. GREG WILSON / GRAN MELIA RESORTS

BY MERCEDES M. CARDONA  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RIO GRANDE, P.R. -- This seaside stretch, a half-hour's drive east of the airport in San Juan, is not placid in midday. Construction equipment rumbles through the beachfront while workers sweat out installing the marble floors and granite countertops in developer Donald Trump's latest Caribbean venture.

The 700-villa Trump International Golf Club and Residences is among several golf resorts on this Caribbean island that are either under construction or being upscaled. Some have famous course designers like Robert Trent Jones, and many are attached to luxury resorts with well-known hotel brand names like St. Regis and Mandarin Oriental.

Golf is one of three tourism niches being targeted for promotion here, along with water sports and food, said Mari Jo Laborde, former deputy executive director of marketing and promotions of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company. Golf is a big part of the island's "Explore Beyond the Shore" campaign highlighting activities outside beaches, she said. And although Puerto Rico has long been a golf destination, the combination of a growing local golf market and a drive to attract more affluent tourists is putting an emphasis on luxury.

This might seem like a risky approach given the current economic downturn. Puerto Rico, like many tourism destinations, is experiencing a drop in visitors. Tourist visits to the island fell 4.7 percent in early 2009, compared to the same months in 2008, according to the Caribbean Tourism Organization.

But hoteliers and course owners are hoping that a more affluent crowd will be less vulnerable to the economy's swings than the package-tour-and-cruise market concentrated around the port of San Juan.

### LONG-RANGE PLANS

High-end projects can also take years to come to fruition after they are planned and financed. "They are

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definitely an investment in the future," said Peter Finch, senior editor at Golf Digest magazine. "It takes years and in some cases decades to get everything lined up for these courses to open. These golf courses are major undertakings across hundreds and hundreds of acres, if not thousands of acres. You can't just snap your fingers and they appear."

Not far from the Trump villas, St. Regis Hotels & Resorts in 2007 opened the Bahia Beach golf course, designed by Robert Trent Jones; a luxury hotel and spa are scheduled to open in 2010. Diaz noted a 369-room J.W. Marriott hotel is expected to open in early 2011 next to the Trump property. Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group and Regent Hotels & Resorts have both announced they will open new luxury hotels in 2011 in Palmas del Mar, a resort southeast of San Juan with championship golf courses designed by Reese Jones and Gary Player. Existing hotels are also raising their game with renovations and additions.

The number of residential units at the Trump resort in Puerto Rico, a \$600-million project, was halved from an initial plan of 1,400 villas, while other aspects of the project were upgraded, said Jorge L. Diaz, partner of Empresas Diaz, the developer of the project. In addition to the existing 36-hole Tom Kite golf course, all of the 56 "Founder Residences" are now built and a 10-acre beach club is underway, with completion scheduled for mid-2011. Later this year, construction is set to begin on golf villas and beach villas.

Next door to the Trump course, the Gran Melia Puerto Rico Golf Resort and Villas has upgraded from Melia's Paradisus all-inclusive brand to a more upscale Gran Melia hotel. All rooms in the 486-suite hotel were redecorated, restaurants upgraded to focus on fine dining and staff retrained. The upgrades were coincidental, but the Trump project, "goes on a par with the Gran Melia brand," said Evy Garcia, director of sales and marketing. "We get many golfers, especially now, with the PGA (tournament)."

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