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Kapalua's Plantation Course On Maui Closes For Nine-Month Renovation

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The Plantation Course on Maui has shut down for a nine-month, tee-to-green renovation project.

I visited Kapalua, Maui, for the first time back in 1992 on a family trip and remember being awestruck by the tropical beauty: the beaches, the mountains, the ocean... and the golf. It was like heaven on earth.

I was barely 20 years old and had just started playing golf only five or six years earlier, mostly hacking it around my local munis with friends unless I was playing somewhere while on vacation. I recall thinking the par-3 fifth hole at Kapalua's Bay Course – with its heroic carry over a rocky bay – was the coolest hole I'd ever seen. From the villa at which we were staying, my younger brother and I would actually snorkel around the point into the cove to collect some of the balls that suffered a watery demise.

There were three courses in Kapalua at the time: the Bay, the Village (now closed) and the Plantation, which had opened just a year earlier.

I hadn't realized the provenance of the Plantation Course. I had no idea it was the first design collaboration by the team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw. I didn't know that broadcaster Mark Roling, who worked for the Kapalua Resort at the time, helped make the course a reality with visions of one day bringing the PGA TOUR to the islands. I actually didn't know anything at all about its design and, at the time, wouldn't have appreciated it if I had.

But I did know the Plantation Course was supposed to be the best of the three layouts, built high up on the side of a mountain and boasting wide fairways that seemed to flow downhill like ski slopes.



The first tee at the Plantation Course during the Sentry Tournament of Champions

Now, 28 years after it opened, the Plantation Course has closed.

Not for good, mind you, but to undergo a comprehensive, tee-to-green renovation for the next nine months. It's a project that is expected to cost between \$11 million and \$12 million and will make a special course that much better. The last day of play was Feb. 10 and the Plantation isn't scheduled to open again until December, meaning it will be ready to host this season's PGA TOUR winners in the Sentry Tournament of Champions come January 2020.

After being lucky enough to play the course in the Pro-Am event ahead of this year's Tournament of Champions, I can't wait to see the restoration, which fittingly is being overseen by Coore and Crenshaw.

Although I teed it up at the Plantation Course a couple times during those family vacations years ago, it wasn't until this latest trip in January that I got a true appreciation for the Kapalua gem that is unquestionably one of the stars in a deep portfolio of resort courses operated by Troon Golf, the world's biggest management company.



The writer and his daughter with Pro-Am partner Matt Kuchar at the 2019 Sentry Tournament of Champions at Kapalua.

In addition to the wide fairways and dramatic elevation changes, there are deep ravines, fun angles, massive undulating greens and spectacular views of the ocean and neighboring island of Molokai. It's sometimes hard to conceive that a course was built on the rugged land that was a former pineapple plantation. Back on Maui with several decades of golf coverage under my belt, I had a much greater appreciation of the drama, scale and subtleties of a special layout. Every part of the 28-year-old course will be re-worked during the overhaul, from tee boxes and fairways to greens, bunkers, approaches and new drainage. Even the clubhouse will get a facelift. While the course is on TV each January, hosting the PGA TOUR's best, the chief intent of the renovation is to cater to the resort players who visit Maui the other 51 weeks of the year. The Plantation will be rejuvenated and refined, and most importantly be restored to the way it played in its early years, when I first experienced it.

"Anyone who was here in those years knows, the golf course played much firmer, much faster than it does and has in the last decade," Bill Coore said.



Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, the original designers of the Plantation Course, are overseeing the renovation.

“The fairways may be hugely wide, but if the ground is firm and fast even the best players in the world have to pick a proper line to play, otherwise their ball is carried by the wind and the slope into some area they might not prefer,” Coore added. “And yet for the average resort players the ball used to, years ago, chase and chase forever. And so, it made them feel good because they would hit the longest drives they could ever hit in their lives here and it gave them a chance to get to these greens.”

Ultimately, Coore says, the chief goal of the project is to “restore the playability of the golf course that it used to have and has diminished through the years.”

I was a relatively new player the first time I took on the Plantation Course. I have no recollection whatsoever which tees I was playing, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is I remember standing atop the 17th tee, looking down on what seemed like all of Maui spread out below, and hitting a drive toward the ocean that just kept going and going. It’s memories like those -- and the shot euphoria -- that hooked me on the game.

There’s a reason the Plantation Course is widely regarded as the No. 1 layout on Maui. It generates about 38,000 rounds a year and during its heyday had in the neighborhood of 45,000 to 48,000. The visibility the property (and Maui) gets from the Tournament of Champions is also significant and that was a leading driver for shutting down the course: a significant short-term revenue loss for long-time gain.



The renovation at Kapalua's Plantation Course comes after previous work at the property's Bay Course

Alex Nakajima, the General Manager of Kapalua Golf, says that if the Plantation Course wasn't improved and lost the Tournament of Champions, then the Sony Open in Hawaii might no longer be played on neighboring Oahu the following week because the world's top golfers might not make the trip for just one week.

"It's a significant snowball effect for all the islands," Nakajima says of hosting the PGA TOUR's winners-only showdown. "Our owner asked what's the price tag to give up the golf course for 10 days in a big holiday and is it worth it? I think it's still worth it. It costs \$800,000 to \$1 million to orchestrate but it produces \$2 million to \$2.5 million in return in greens fees and merchandise sales."

The work that will be done on the Plantation Course over the next nine months is significant, even if the results might not be that readily apparent to the average golfer.

"Even though the greens may not look much different when you come back next year, we will work on softening some slopes," Coore says. "For the most part it's trying to spread the pin-able areas into greater portions of the greens."

"It's nothing dramatic," adds Coore. "We're trying to restore the playability of the course. We want to make it so that resort players can take advantage of slope so it can run more, to help them."



Kapalua's Plantation Course has consistently been the top-rated course on Maui and is one of the leading properties in the deep Troon Golf portfolio

I might not have fully appreciated playing the Plantation Course during the early 1990's, but I'm glad I got another chance to recognize the property's history, design characteristics, overall quality and impact on Maui as a whole. I can't wait to get back and see the renovation results. Because what hasn't changed in the 25 years or so since I'd been there last is that Maui is still heaven on earth.