

BRAVE NEW WORLD

AGA plays supporting role in helping Nicaragua overcome years of poverty through game of golf

BY DAN VUKELICH • PHOTOS BY MURPHY O'BRIEN

RIVAS, Nicaragua — When David McLay Kidd opened a spectacular new golf course here earlier this year, the Arizona Golf Association was with him — hammering in hazard stakes as howler monkeys screeched in the treetops, iguanas lazed nearby and cries of tropical birds echoed across the jungle.

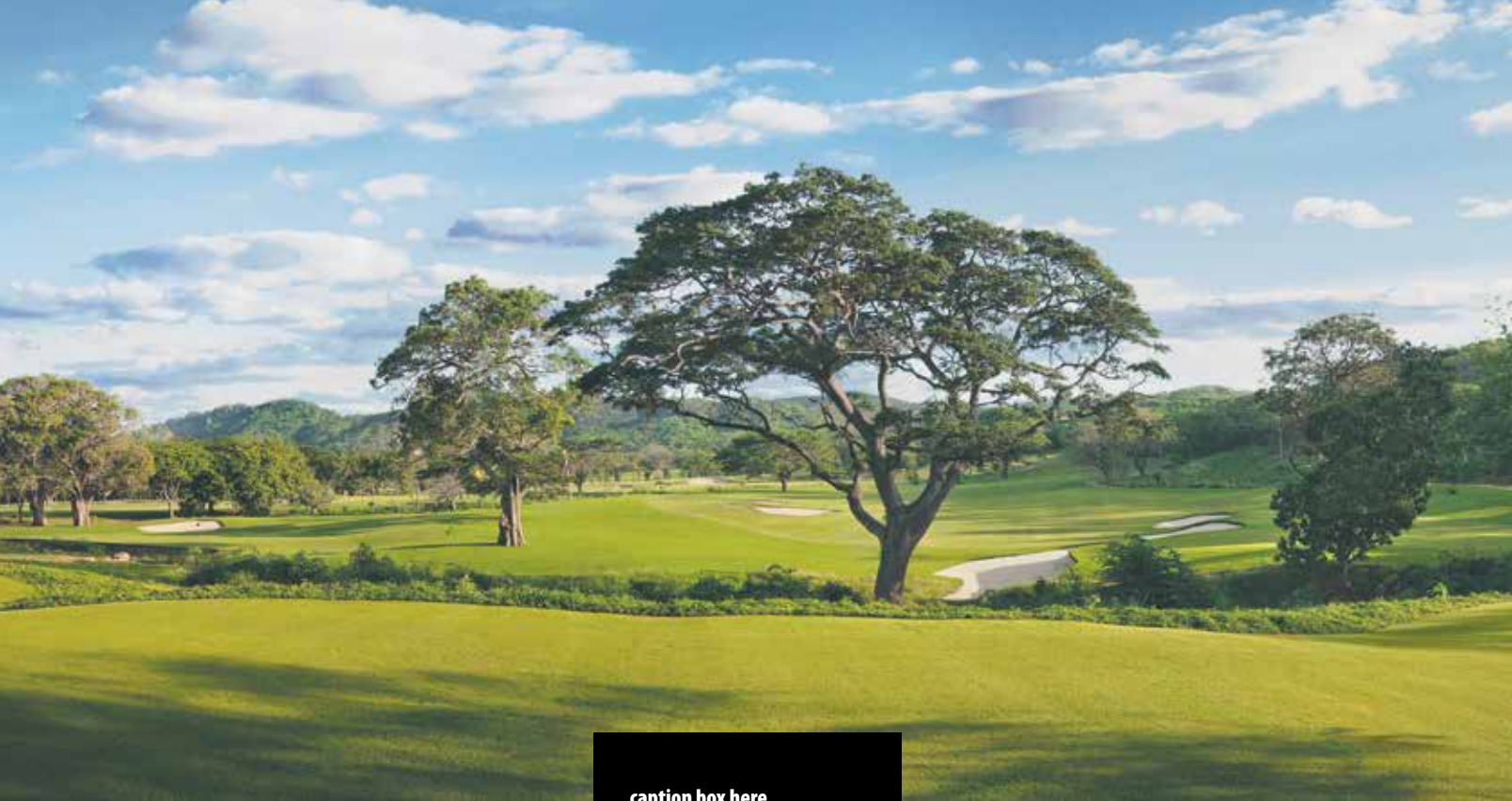
Kidd's newest design, Guacalito de la Isla Golf Club, an amenity of the five-star Mukul Resort, lies above a dramatic stretch of Pacific shoreline known as the Emerald Coast, about two hours south of Managua.

At 6,676 yards from the tips, Guacalito's generous parkland layout rises and falls across a deciduous tropical forest, winding

through, under and around 300-year-old hardwood trees that Kidd absolutely was forbidden to cut down by the resort's owner, Nicaraguan billionaire Carlos Pellas Chamorro.

The result is a golf course perfectly integrated into the land's contours, as Guacalito means "little bowl." Ancient trees — some 100 feet tall — loom in the player's vision across 17 holes until the par-3 18th hole spills spectacularly out of the jungle onto a broad, white-sand beach.

One cove over is a protected nesting ground for rare, critically endangered Ridley sea turtles. Offshore, surfers ride consistent barrels to shore. Farther out, kite surfers dance on the wind and



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gray whales and dolphins breach the shimmering surface. In topography and ocean views, the Emerald Coast rivals California's Monterey Peninsula.

Guacalito's eco-friendly routing, which took Kidd four years to meticulously lay out, should remind people why his first major work – the minimalist, naturalistic Bandon Dunes – blew away the golf world 20 years ago. "I realized that over the years I had gotten away from the concepts that made Bandon so successful, and I've gone back to the idea of not placing obstacles in front of the player," said Kidd, whose portfolio includes such other notables as the Castle Course in St. Andrews and Machrihanish Dunes in Scotland, as well as Tetherow in Oregon.

There's more, added Ed Gowan, executive director of the Arizona Golf Association.

"All in all, this is as complete a new golf course for men and women as I have seen in the last 20 years," Gowan wrote Kidd after he and the AGA's assistant director, Lorraine Thies, spent three days marking the course's hazards in late January.

Guacalito is a part of a new luxury golf and beach resort and residential community that is about to become Central America's next red-hot destination, according to the Wall Street Journal and several other national publications.

Mukul, which means "secret" in a Mayan dialect, has 37 private villas sprinkled across a steep hillside overlooking the ocean. Each has a private pool and deck. Rooms are richly appointed with hand-made Nicaraguan furniture and art. The resort's spa offers seven distinct styles of massage, "One for every day of the week," said Federico Spada, the resort's manager.

The first phase of two-story condos are being

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handed over to their new owners, 96 percent of whom are wealthy Nicaraguans. More luxury condos and single-family home sites are being offered to American and Canadian buyers lured by Nicaragua's natural beauty and low cost of living.

Pellas, the resort's owner and developer, heads Grupo Pellas, a multi-national conglomerate with interests in land development, vehicle dealerships, citrus, sugar mills, ethanol and the highly regarded Flora de Caña rum distillery. Pellas built BAC-Credomatic, Nicaragua's largest bank, before selling it to GE Capital in one of the largest deals ever in Central America.

In the past decade, Nicaragua's once hard-line Marxist Sandinista government significantly loosened business restrictions. Pellas grabbed the chance to take the lead in pushing Nicaragua, the second-poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, to build a sustainable tourism economy, and he's doing it from the ground up. And there are signs it is working, as extreme poverty, which once included 11.2 percent has dropped to 5.5 percent in the past five years.

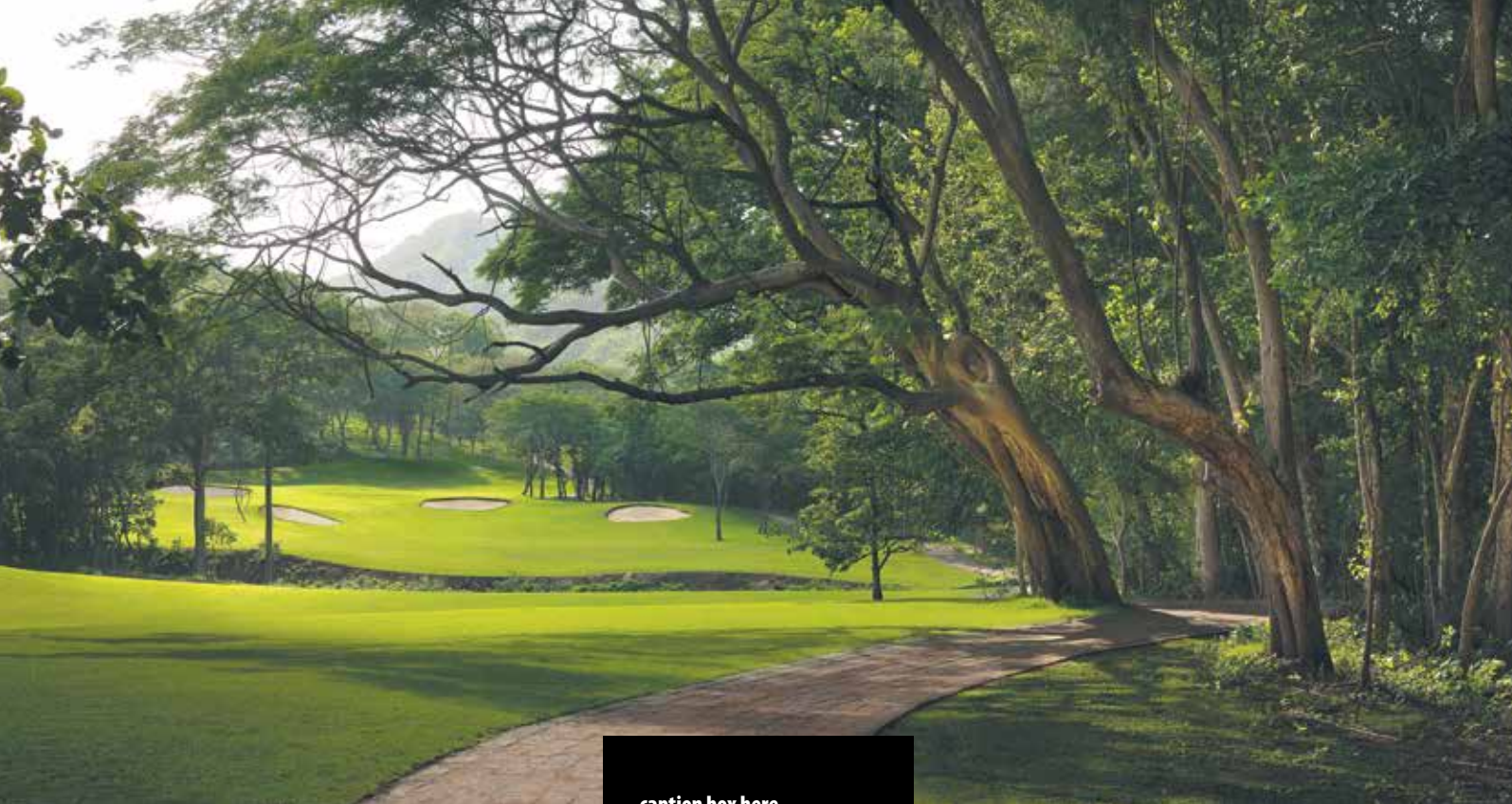
"They say I am crazy making huge bets like this, that the country isn't ready, that I'm jumping the gun. But I think it's the right time," Pellas, a Stanford business graduate, said in an interview.

Rather than hiring a golf-resort management company, Pellas recruited a team of veterans of the Mexican hospitality and golf industry to train a Nicaraguan workforce. People from the surrounding municipality of Tola, many subsistence farmers and fishermen, others who never had a job, now make up 70 percent of Mukul's staff.

Pellas established an academy, "Escuelita Mukul," to train workers the intricacies of hospitality: to teach employees sanitary food handling, how to wait tables, tend bar, clean guest



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villas and caddie for golfers. Many workers who built the resort's roads and villas, transplanted trees and shaped the golf course had never operated mechanized equipment.

Last year, Mukul's Office of Corporate Social Responsibility (each of Grupo Pellas' business units has one) distributed ceramic water filter/purifiers to 550 families in five nearby villages, said program manager Jon Thompson. Another 550 filters will be distributed this year. Since the program started, "We've seen a drastic reduction in diarrhea and kidney infections," Thompson said.

Pellas' company has made small loans of between \$1,000 and \$5,000 to local small businesses. Recipients have included roadside food and craft stalls, small restaurants, hostels and B&Bs. Businesses that significantly improve standards can be forgiven their loans. "We want this place to be an authentic destination for people who want to visit an unexplored destination, and we want to do it in a sustainable way that benefits Nicaragua through what I call 'inclusive capitalism,'" Pellas said.

His push for sustainability led Pellas to Kidd, son of a Scottish golf superintendent, who walked Guacalito for months before clearing what Pellas calls "arbusto," the Spanish word for bushy, low-lying vegetation that obscured the forest's giant Guanacaste, Madroño, Tamarindo and Genizaro trees.

Faced with Pellas' "no cut" dictum, Kidd transplanted 1,500 trees from fairways to the course's turfed margins — an arboreal version of Moses' parting of the Red Sea. Mukul set a world record for the largest tree ever moved, a 1-million-pound Guanacaste tree dragged and

pushed by giant bulldozers to a spot inside Mukul's front gate.

How the AGA came to be in Nicaragua goes back to 2008, when Guacalito's director of golf, Andrew Gilchrist, a Scot raised in Mexico, then running the Nicklaus course at the Mayan Palace Resort in Puerto Peñasco, asked for the AGA's help in marketing his course and addressing playability issues. Last fall, he began working with the AGA on a plan for Guacalito.

Gowan said the towering trees, which he initially feared would unfairly play from tee boxes, now define holes and add challenges and visual drama. Guacalito's Penn State-trained agronomist and superintendent Chip Caswell agrees, but goes further. Tree limbs high above the 18th tee, for example, were left untouched to allow a band of howler monkeys living on the hillside above No. 17 to make the aerial commute across 18 to the rest of their territory.

Cutting the limbs would have reduced the band's habitat by as much as 50 percent. "In two years here, I've seen those monkeys on the ground maybe five times — those upper limbs are that important," Caswell said.

That kind of attention to environmental detail helps Guacalito live up to Pellas' vision of sustainability. It also makes a course that you could play every day for a week and never tire of it. That being said, whether or not Guacalito's massive trees, arroyos and ball-gobbling jungle make a monkey out of you — well, that's another story. ■

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CHAMORRO

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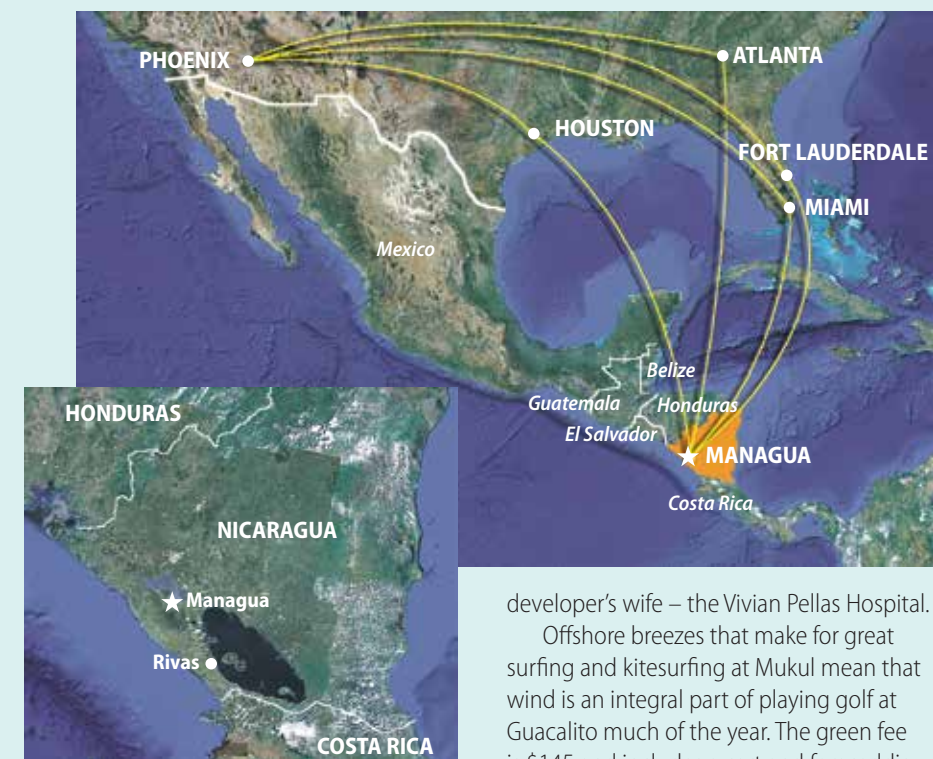
NAVIGATING NICARAGUA: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Mukul Resort near Rivas is about two and a half hours by car south of Managua's Augusto C. Sandino International Airport, which has non-stop service from Houston, Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Atlanta. Carriers include United, American, Delta, Copa, TACA and Spirit, and flying time is less than three hours. Mukul guests can schedule a helicopter pickup at Managua and make the trip in about 20 minutes during daylight hours. An airport capable of handling business jets and Boeing 737s is planned near the resort, with the eventual goal of scheduled Iberia Airways service from major Central American cities.

In the meantime, Mukul's Guacalito de la Isla Golf Club is best classified as an adventure golf destination, so travelers should keep in mind the following:

Although much of the road from Managua to Rivas recently was upgraded to U.S. highway-quality two-lane blacktop, at night the roadway can be an unnerving obstacle course of unlighted vehicles, dogs, horses, pigs and groups of pedestrians.

It's best to have a car from the resort pick you up. The drive during daylight is safer, but heavy traffic on the older cobbled Mexican-style roadway near Managua can significantly add to



travel time. Be forewarned: Under Nicaraguan law, a driver involved in a serious accident can be arrested and held until police sort out the facts.

The water at the Mukul Resort is filtered and safe to drink. Unlike Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, there is no worry about malaria or other tropical diseases. And should anything arise health-wise, the best hospital in Nicaragua is nearby and named after the

developer's wife — the Vivian Pellas Hospital.

Offshore breezes that make for great surfing and kitesurfing at Mukul mean that wind is an integral part of playing golf at Guacalito much of the year. The green fee is \$145 and includes a cart and forecaddie. Rooms are a bit pricier, with an ocean view "bohio," or beachfront villa, costing \$620 a night with a 17 percent tax on top of that.

The dry season on Nicaragua's Pacific Coast is roughly Thanksgiving through May. The rest of the year can bring monsoonal rains that can dump as much as 5 inches in an hour, but Guacalito has tremendous natural drainage and can be playable again within 20 minutes. — Dan Vukelich