

## TOURISM

# Esencia plans luxury Carbonera golf resort near Varadero

BY LARRY LUXNER

The 2011 Esencia & Montecristo Cup golf tournaments — to be held Apr. 15-16 in Varadero — will attract top-ranked golfers from many countries including Great Britain, Canada, Spain, China, Vietnam and South Korea.

The event is being hosted by the Varadero Golf Club and Palmares SA together with Esencia Hotels & Resorts, whose planned \$300 million Carbonera Country Club aims to become Cuba's premier golfing destination.

The new resort will be located about 15 minutes west of the existing Varadero Golf Club, currently Cuba's only 18-hole professional golf course.

"We've been working on this for over three years, and the project is now in the final stages of approval," Esencia's CEO, Andrew Macdonald, said by phone from Spain. "We've been told informally that the Ministry of Tourism will approve four projects in the first wave, and that we're one of the four."

Esencia's oceanfront project encompasses 170 hectares and includes not only a 70-hectare PGA championship 18-hole golf course

*This is the 5th in a series of special reports on golf and marina projects in Cuba. For more information, contact Johnny Considine, marketing manager, Esencia Hotels & Resorts, Provident House, Suite #7, Haviland Street, St. Peter Port, Guernsey GY1 2QE, United Kingdom. Tel: +44 1481 714898. Email: info@esenciagroup.com.*

but also 650 mixed villas and apartments.

There will also be a luxurious 120-bed, five-star boutique hotel "and quite a lot of restaurants, not only for the residents but also for other tourists and people coming from Havana to spend the day," said Macdonald.

The 45-year-old Scottish entrepreneur told us he's been coming to Cuba for the last eight years. Among other ventures, his company owns the brand license for the Floridita, a popular restaurant in London patterned after its famous namesake in Old Havana.

"We had a very successful restaurant in Madrid, but had to close it because of the economic downturn. We also had one in Dublin, but sadly our partners there — TRG, one of Ireland's biggest restaurant and pub companies — went bankrupt," he told *CubaNews*.

"Today, the only one left is London. It's been very successful," Macdonald told us. "That's what we've been doing while we were developing relationships in Cuba."

Esencia's 50-50 joint venture with Palmares focuses on golf, he explained, "because of Cuba's desire to attract a more discerning, higher level of tourist. Obviously, we have a lot of experience in golf, being a British sport. In Scotland alone, we have 650 golf courses and only five million people."

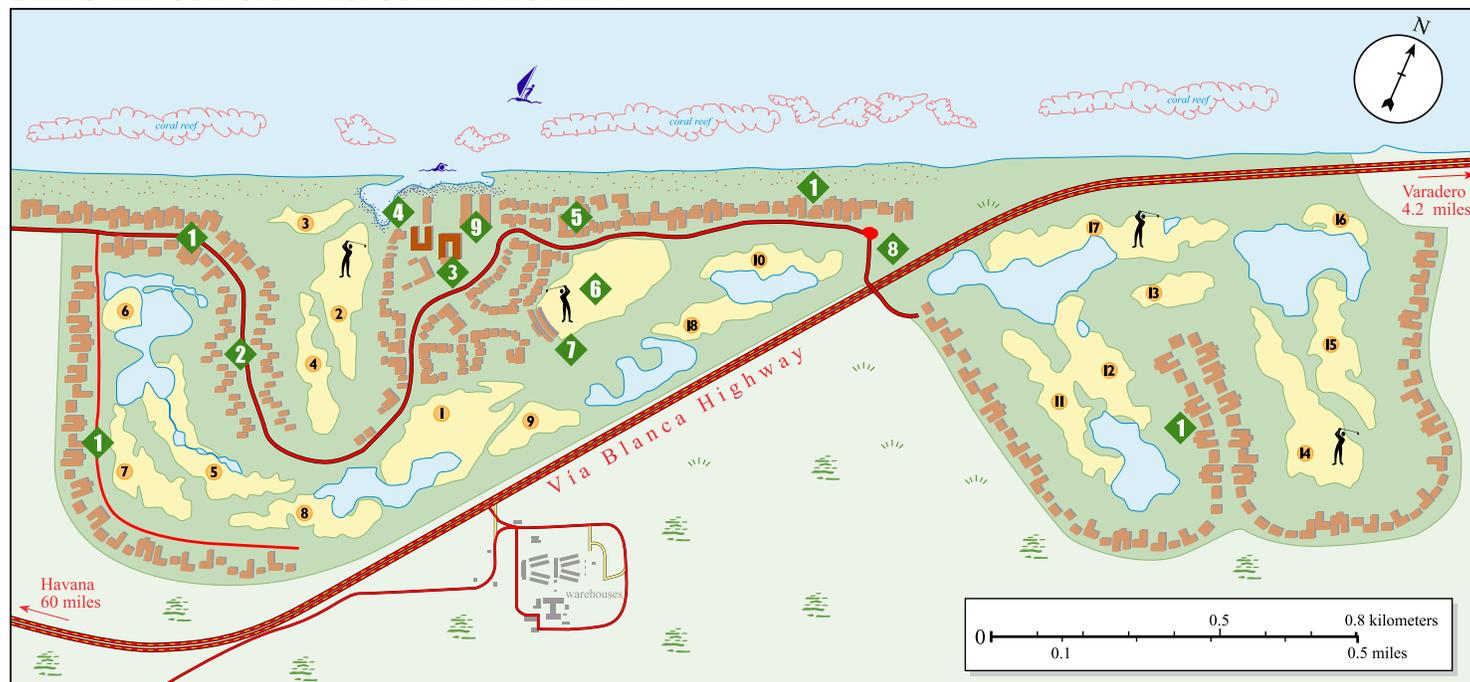
## U.K. IS WORLD'S TOP SOURCE OF GOLF TOURISM

Despite the lack of substantial trade between the two countries, the fact is that Great Britain is the second-largest source of tourism to Cuba after Canada. It also sends more golf tourists abroad (six million last year) than any country in the world.

"So that combination of factors represents an interesting possibility," Macdonald said. Due to Europe's lingering economic crisis, he told *CubaNews*, "we're not going to see exponential, huge growth in British tourism to Cuba this year, but our fingers are crossed

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## CARBONERA GOLF CLUB PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT



### PROJECTED FACILITIES

- |                     |                    |                   |                     |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Luxury villas     | 4 Lagoon and beach | 7 Clubhouse       | 7 Golf course holes |
| 2 Conran residences | 5 Spanish village  | 8 Secure entrance | Villas              |
| 3 Hotel & spa       | 6 Driving range    | 9 Country club    | Hotels              |



## Carbonera — FROM PAGE 6

that the worst is over.”

Tourists staying at the Carbonera Country Club — named after a nearby village that’s currently home to 90 people — will obviously be well-heeled. While Macdonald didn’t specify how much rooms at the boutique hotel will cost per night, he did say that Club Havana charges foreigners living in Cuba around \$2,500 a year to use its facilities, and that “we’ll be above that.”

In fact, he said, “one of the things we want to create is a colonial, art-deco feel. You might think Carbonera Country Club has been here for the last 60 years. You won’t see modern designs in this project.”

According to Esencia’s website, the luxury villas by Rafael de La-Hoz will boast “traditional colonial architecture, stunning airy interiors, sleek fixtures and stylish decor.”

Homes will include two-story, three-bedroom properties ranging from 180 to 220 square meters, arranged in small clusters with individual shared pools. Four- and five-bedroom villas will range from 300 to 500 square meters, some with private pools.

Apartments will be available in one, two and three bedrooms, duplexes and penthouses forming a traditional Spanish village with integrated shops, bars, restaurants and pools.

Separately, the Conran Residences — situated in their own community within the Carbonera Club — will consist of clusters of three or four three-story buildings around a shared courtyard pool.

Two, three and four-bedroom apartments

### PGA objects to Cuba deal

Leisure Canada Inc. and the Professional Golfers’ Association Ltd. of the United Kingdom on Mar. 14 unveiled an exclusive agreement to develop golf facilities in Cuba.

Leisure Canada has three luxury resort projects under various stages of development in Havana, Jibacoa and Cayo Largo (see *CubaNews*, February 2011, page 6-7).

“The PGA looks forward to working with Leisure Canada and their Cuban partners to bring world-class golf facilities to Cuba,” said Guy Moran, the PGA’s head of property and development. “Working with the government and the people of Cuba, we hope to further develop the game of golf for the benefit of tourist and Cubans alike.”

But PGA of America objects to the deal, saying it never authorized use of the PGA mark and that “we intend to pursue all legal avenues to prevent the use of this mark for this project in Cuba.”

In a Mar. 18 press statement, it declared that “PGA of America adheres to the policies of the United States ... which limits American businesses from conducting business with Cuban interests.”

Details: J.J. Jennex, Investor Relations Dir., Leisure Canada Inc, Vancouver, BC. Tel: (888) 600-8687. URL: [www.leisurecanada.com](http://www.leisurecanada.com).

will be distributed over the site; with ground-floor apartments (covering 148 square meters) enjoying access to their own walled garden space.

Carbonera is “quite small” compared to Cap Cana in the Dominican Republic, said Macdonald. “Maybe it’s because we’re quite conservative. But we feel very comfortable with the size. It’s small and manageable.”

### ESENCIA HOPES TO BREAK EVEN IN 3-4 YEARS

Macdonald estimated Esencia’s investment in the \$300 million project at around \$100 million. He expects to recoup that investment within three or four years, and hopes to break ground sometime this year. Once that happens, buildout will take another 28 months.

“Everybody is overwhelmed by the level of technical understanding. Our experience is among equals,” he said when asked about Esencia’s venture with Palmares. “In terms of doing business with Cuba, once there’s a relationship of trust, doing business is enjoyable and fairly swift.”

Macdonald also has interests in Cuba’s potential for renewable energy. The company’s chairman is a former member of parliament, Brian Wilson. Scotland is seen as a European center of research into renewable energy, particularly biomass — and a Scottish-Cuban

energy partnership is now in the works, thanks to Wilson’s efforts.

It goes without saying that Carbonera will utilize the latest in renewable energy technology, said Macdonald.

“With such a big development, it would be unethical not to make it as environmentally friendly as possible,” he told *CubaNews*. “All the buildings, villas and apartments will have their own solar panels. And the golf courses will be irrigated by seawater.”

Esencia’s partners include Galeon, a property asset management boutique focusing on the Spanish and Latin markets; One Works, a leading Italian architecture, infrastructure and urban engineering practice, and PGA Design Consulting, which serves the 7,000-member PGA of Great Britain and Ireland.

Also involved are global real-estate service Savills, the architectural and interior design studio Conran & Partners, and Madrid-based Rafael de La-Hoz architectural studio.

“This is one of the most exciting projects we have been involved with for some time,” said Sir Terence Conran, founder of Conran & Partners. “It is something new for Cuba and something new for us as architects and designers. I look forward to being able to smoke a few cigars on my balcony with a glass of fine Cuban rum.” □

## Big hotels threaten Varadero’s charm

BY DALIA ACOSTA / INTER PRESS SERVICE

Important architectural works from the modern movement are expected to be demolished as a result of the expansion of massive hotel complexes, which will replace the original landscape in Varadero, Cuba’s most famous beach resort.

The alert was first sounded in 2010 when rumors began to spread about the demolition of the Hotel Internacional and the Hotel Club Cabañas del Sol, two 1950s structures located in Varadero, 140 km east of Havana in the province of Matanzas.

Two statements issued by ICOMOS, the Cuban branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, have received no response, architect Jorge Fornés told IPS.

Fornés is chair of the National Committee of ICOMOS, an independent NGO that works closely with UNESCO and is dedicated to conserving the world’s historic monuments and sites.

“Independently of any decisions, I have no doubt as an architect that it is not necessary to eliminate something valuable to build something new. If there is interest in preserving a valuable piece of heritage, there is always a way to do so,” he added, citing cases like the conservation of colonial fortifications in Old Havana.

Nor have demands from intellectuals and academics, mainly circulated by email, received an official public response from the Tourism Ministry or Cuban media. An employee at the Hotel Internacional told IPS,

“The decision has already been reached.”

“There are contradictory versions,” Roberto Fernández García, a poet who lives in Varadero, said in an email message that sums up the results of his inquiries and those of others interested in the case.

Fernández García said officials told him that the Hotel Internacional, which opened on Dec. 24, 1950, “is very old, small and old-fashioned, with few rooms, and no longer meets the requirements of today’s tourism.”

He said the 161-room hotel would be demolished to build, on the same site, a modern 800-room structure. Cabañas del Sol, other tourist installations from the first half of the 20th century — when architects of the modern movement were seeking a fresh expression of the Cuban identity — and buildings in the old city in Varadero also apparently face the same fate.

But the Matanzas office of the historian offered a different explanation.

According to a message circulated by the Cofradía de la Negritud, a NGO representing black people, in this case the response was that “the hotel’s plumbing system is in a state of collapse, so it is more economical to demolish it and build from scratch, than to repair it.”

But tourism authorities did not mention poor structural condition to the hotel’s employees. “They told us the hotel would be demolished because of environmental regulations, and that it was useless to turn

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