TRAVEL

Inside Panther National, Justin Thomas' and Jack Nicklaus' luxe South-Florida collab

BY: DYLAN DETHIER | JANUARY 19, 2024

Developer Dominik Senn wanted Panther National to look, feel and play distinctly different from your average Florida country club course. He got his wish. Exhibit A: the labyrinthian bunker that separates the fairways of holes 11 and 17. COURTESY OF PANTHER NATIONAL

It's a sunny Friday morning in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., and Justin Thomas has 223 yards to the flag. I can't help but wonder how many 4-irons Thomas has hit on sunny Florida mornings, but I know he's never hit one quite like this.

We're on the 7th hole at Panther National, a new South Florida enclave that also happens to be Thomas' first course design credit. Swiss developer Dominik Senn brought the project to Jack Nicklaus, Nicklaus reached out to Thomas and a partnership was born. Now it's Opening Day — Nov. 17, 2023. Later, there'll be an exhibition match involving Thomas and some pro-golfing friends (Xander! Rickie!). But Thomas has 10 spare minutes in the morning, which means this is the first hole played on the first day of Panther National's official life. Water lurks left and the wind is off the left. A steep slope repels balls off the right side, leaving a challenging chip. Thomas knows the perils that lurk; he helped design them.

The clubhouse, which features multiple dining venues, lounges, a courtyard firepit and a state-of-the-art fitness center, was designed by architect Max Strang and echoes the luxe style of the 218 residences set for construction at Panther National (houses ranging in price from $5-$50 million)..

COURTESY OF PANTHER NATIONAL

How do you build a course in Palm Beach that doesn't feel like it's in Florida? That was the challenge laid down by Senn, a former pro alpine skier easily bored by the flat, condo-lined standard set by the Sunshine State. The answer was to head inland — and bring some dirt.

"How did you find a piece of property like this in South Florida?" Nicklaus asks rhetorically later in the day. "Obviously, we didn't find it. We created it."

There are several stories here, perhaps the most intriguing is that of a developer who wants to bring principles of new-age golf design to an old-school area.

Back in the fairway, Thomas insists he's not aiming at the flag, but instinct takes over and he hits a towering draw that starts about a yard left of the pin and holds that line against the wind, checking up pin high and setting up a stress-free birdie.

"That's why you aim away from the pin," he says, cheekily. "So you can get away with a miss like that."

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