

Kapalua Plantation Course Maui, Hawaii

Designers: Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw (1991)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
Championship	73	7263	74.9	138
Regular	73	6547	71.7	130

Overview:

It was very early in their partnership that Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw took on the task of designing a golf course on the rugged hillside terrain overlooking Kapalua Bay. I am convinced they needed a sherpa guide and a couple of llamas to stake out the tees and greens for their creation. What resulted was something unique, a golf course that yo-yos you up and down some of the steepest terrain you have ever negotiated without carabiners and a climber's harness. It is a exhilarating anti-gravitational golf experience that calls for creativity and a lot of letting go to be successful.

The routing is very creative with holes working straight down and straight up the fall line of the property. The predominant wind direction was taken into account as well and together this makes the printed yardage on each hole almost inconsequential to the length the holes actually play. You can count on a 20 + breeze almost all the time which means links rules prevail, you have to control your trajectory throughout the round and taking the wind into account on your putting is essential. The wild card factor is something I call "ground sheer", it is the seemingly arbitrary amount of side roll out you get that will take balls to places you could never have anticipated. With this excessive side slip and a cross wind in the same direction and you need to aim into the next time zone just to get the ball into the part of the hole you can play from.

The one good thing is they made most of the fairway landing areas like Augusta, there is ample room to maneuver your tee ball to maximize your distance and still stay on the short grass. The bunkering throughout the course is very visually creative and all of them have a tactical purpose. In some cases they are baiting you to try to reach too far but more often it is just a way of forcing you to pick a good line and execute a shot to get there. The greens are very large and often very long, which, with links rules in place, is a positive factor for managing the ball to the flag position on the downwind holes. The other architectural factor you have to heed is the segmentation and the prevailing slope of each green. You cannot simply pick a club based on a calculated approach yardage, you have to think of the shape of the shot and how it will respond on the green once it lands. Getting close to the flag is often a diversionary play, hitting it off a side bank to have it end up in the right section of the green.

The visuals on this course are in the category of Pebble Beach. Many times it is downright distracting standing on the tee looking at the back drop and then trying to focus on the target at hand. An unbelievable job was done presenting holes that boldly brandish the beauty of this unique piece of property. The versatility of this layout is that some of the most interesting views are back up the hole you just played. Bring a camera, there is a scrapbook of memories to take home with you.

The round opens up with a hole that sets the tone for the day, a stunning downhill 440 yard par four. You drive to right center and then the ball just disappears over the hill where you can have as little as 120 into the green. The next three holes work their way back up the hill, yardage is not a factor on any of them, but positioned play is absolutely vital to getting your scorecard off to a good start. Five is a par five that has all the visual flavor you could ask for in a full round of golf. This is typical of a hole where the look baits you to try things you should not consider, showing restraint is rewarded.

When you look at the sixth hole across the environmental divide as you are playing number five you may scratch your head trying to figure out what the hell these guys had going on in their head when they designed the next hole. Standing on the sixth tee of this 380 yard par four the enigma only grows. There is a huge mound containing a huge bunker sitting in the middle of the driving area. As you can see in the picture the back side of this looks like the replica of an Inca holy temple. What you cannot see is that a bold driving line between the bunker and the right abyss will feed the ball into the power slot and take the ball to foot of grandmother's house. When you end up pulling your tee ball left of the bunker because of your subconscious defensive nature you will have to use two clubs less and the ground sheer of the back side of Machu Picchu to feed down to the green. This is where creativity and trust will serve you well.

Your scorecard on the front will be saved or doomed by how you negotiate the next three holes. Seven is a 465 yard par four playing straight down the fall line. Picking a good line on both shots and letting gravity do its thing will be rewarded. Eight is a no nonsense dartboard par three across the vegetation wilderness. The exposure of the ball flight to the wind makes finding this green a real chore. Nine is almost unplayable by mere mortals, you have to hit three high quality shots into a strong headwind to an uphill target. The green complex is so difficult that even good shots can be repelled so be prepared to turn the other cheek and accept your fate on this hole.

The weakest aspect to the course is the first five holes on the back side. All five are short and extremely technical holes with maximum ground sheer and probably the most exposed wind conditions of the day. The big hitters will be very uncomfortable in this section of the course muttering under their breath phrases like "unfair" and "are you kidding me". I share their concern because the concentration of holes like this in a run seems to derail the "cut it loose" feeling from the opening nine.

The finish is outstanding, a series of fun holes the thoughts of which you will carry with you well past the end of the day. You cannot help but notice the guard rails that occupy the right side of the driving area on fifteen-this is a strong statement to the ground sheer right on this hole. The visual of the green complex while as stand over your second shot is very disarming. Playing the next two very demanding shots and giving yourself a birdie chance is quite gratifying. Sixteen is just another one unlike anything you have played already today. You have a decision to make as to which side of the split fairway you want to play from-that decision will change the approach shot considerably.

If you have watched the annual PGA Tournament of Champions played here each January you are familiar with these two finishing holes as the most severe downhill holes they play all year. The first of the two falls below your feet like bungee cord jump waiting to happen. Elevating the ball down the center the ball will disappear from sight and just keep rolling until it reaches the bottom of the hill about 300 yards away. The second is a real beauty across the trouble to a green clinging precariously to the hill above you. Managing the roll out of this shot is trick-the contour of this green will be kind to the right shape and trajectory of approach.

This final hole so often determines the winner of the PGA event each year-the pros can make anything from 3 to 7 and you will be amazed you have the same proposition facing you. You aim your drive at the clubhouse right of the fairway and, to your amazement, when the free fall of your ball and the ensuing roll out is done you are pinned to the left edge of the fairway almost at the bottom of the hill. The downhill second shot is within reach of the putting surface but you must aim well right of the green and let gravity do its thing again. If you are not on, the ensuing pitch is like trying to stop your ball on the hood of a Mini Cooper, it will take full creativity and use of the ground to pull this off. The coolest part is that if you play this hole well you did it in front of everyone lunching in the clubhouse grill overlooking the entire hole. You can just feel the appreciative applause. These last two holes are an adrenaline rush like you have never experienced before on a golf course.

Hole-By-Hole Analysis:

#1 Par 4 473/434 yards

What a view, it looks like the final plunge at the Six Flags Log Flume. From the tee box just below the clubhouse your drive is cascading down rapidly to a landing area below you that slopes to Lahaina. This ball will just keep going and going and going. Hit it center to left center for the best angle at the green that sits across a deep crease in the terrain. Bill and Ben are telling you right here that there are places to hit it and places not to hit it. The not to is the right side of the green which falls off into a vegetation wilderness preserve. The green has a decided tilt to the right so the best shot is a draw working against that trend landing on the first third of the left side. It will do the ground drift to the center and back on its own..

#2 Par 3 218/196

Seemingly simple longish par 3 but pay attention to the wind direction. Green is on level to the teeing area with a lovely set of four bunkers delineating the right side of the hole. It visually sets you up to hit a fade from the naked side of the hole working up the diagonal set of this long green. If the wind is behind you have to land it on the front and feed it back. The only real no-no here is any of those four bunkers. You should make a par here if you execute a basic swing.

#3 Par 4 380/352

Now you turn back up the hill and play a shortish dogear right into the rising incline. Drive is likely upwind, aim at the left greenside bunker to end up in the center of this fairway. Green sits raised from the fairway so you have to elevate this second shot into the center of the green. Take a moment to appreciate the bunkering on this green, it is a work of art. Big bunker left would be an unlikely up and down and the pots on the right are no bargain either.

#4 Par 4 382/317

Continuing up the hill you have a short one with peril on the left. The tee ball is about 210 over the blind hill in front of you-keep it to the right of the aiming stake or else the steep side slope will send you down into the foliage on the left. The greenside bunkers are well short of the putting surface here so ignore them. As you will often see today, this green has segmentation that will gather a wandering ball, so study the green map and plan your approach carefully.

#5 Par 5 532/485

This begins a series of visual holes that will knock your socks off. From your first look this bending, wending par five dogleg right is enticing you to do stupid things you should not consider. Play this hole conservatively up the left all the way, the ground sheer to the right is a factor all the way from tee to green. Any guts or glory stuff up the right and you are looking at triple. *Diversionary footnote: as you make your way up this fairway take a look to your right over the environmental divide and make note of where the pin on #6 is set today.* Drive is left center and the hill will move it back to the right. Layup to 90 on the left will carry you past the turn and give you a straight look at the green slightly below you. Bunkering here is around the back and the right side strictly for ball retention purposes. This green leans toward the low wilderness right of the green so work your short pitch with the hill to get it close to a right or back pin. What a stunning view from this green looking back. Note that maybe the best vista of this green is from the sixth tee.

#6 Par 4 398/378

In many ways this next hole defines the entire Plantation experience-it is a hole the likes of which you will never see again unless they build a Pete Dye Course at Machu Picchu. From the tee you will note foliage oblivion down the right and the front of a huge bunker embankment in the center of the fairway. There is fairway to the left and fairway to the right. It may seem counter intuitive but the only shot is the bold screamer at the aiming pole in the distance just right of the center bunker. If the ball catches the power slot it will roll down the back of this Inca Pyramid embankment all the way to the foot of the green. All second shots from in front of the bunker go at the same aiming pole using the back spine of the ritual mound to plunge toward the green. Do not be surprised if your ball cascades all the way down and through the green into the pitching area below the green. This green is sharply banked from the hill on the left to the valley on the right so putts from that direction have to be mashed. The side hill breaks are a doozie. Look back up from the green and you will realize you would need a grappling hook to go back where you came from..

#7 Par 4 484/465

Major contrast to the last-you now play a long par four dogleg right down the prevailing slope. Drive is right center tumbling endlessly to center. You will probably have about 200 left further down the slope to an extraordinarily long green that ramps away from you. All the bunkering up the right says aim a long club at the front left edge and let the slope kick it on to the green. Given the 50 yard length of this putting surface don't be surprised if you end up with a long two putt to try to negotiate a par. Just a wonderful, user friendly hole to play.

#8 Par 3 203/172

Another startling offering coming up-a mid-range three par played across the environmental abyss to a shimmering sliver of green draped across the hill below. The bunkering that surrounds the green frames the target nicely and gives you stuff to aim at. The wind will turn your shot into a parasail as it crosses the divide so you may have to aim drastically away from the target to get it on this green. Good news is the green is steeply banked toward you so if you hit ground it stays there. It is a thing of beauty it is watching this ball float down to this green-if you are putting on your second you deserve some high fives.

#9 Par 5 521/490

This is my least favorite hole on the course. Given the prevailing wind direction and the architecture of the hole I find it borderline unplayable. This is a short par five that is nicknamed "Long" because of the wind direction, which when you add the forced carry and the uphill, becomes "Extremely Long". Drive needs to be long and down the left center to get as close to the edge of the drop off as you can. From there you peer across the great divide to a landing area perched over a grass wall with bunkers framing both sides. The real problem is that this carry is hard enough but it is made more difficult by the down hill lie from which you are likely playing your three wood. If you make this traverse successfully it only gets harder. The small green is perched above you like a crown on the hill and has a false front and stepped surface. If the wind is blowing hard, and it usually is, a ball landing on the front may come to a complete stop and then get blown off the deck back to the foot of the hill in front of the green. That can be gratifying. The good news is the back of the green is raised so any pin in the center or back you can hit it to the back edge and let the green feed it back to center for an uphill putt. They need about 42 trucks of dirt to fill in part of the great divide to make this playable for mortals.

#10 Par 4 354/283

As they say in luge, you are now entering the technical part of the course where it is about precise control not speed. These next five holes will drive big hitters crazy because they are short by standard but the wind and the ground sheer influence are at their peak and make these holes very difficult to negotiate without any luge wrecks. It is my sense that Bill and Ben just ran out of useable ground in trying to get a routing to the last four so they had to shoehorn five short ones into this space.

Very short one to open up this side. Hit a 210 yard club right of the direction stake because the ground drift to the left is big. If your ball stays in the fairway you have something around 100 across a fairway bunker tucked in the dogleg to a green that sits above you to the left and leans that way as well. Best shot is at the right edge of the green with a draw feeding down into the center. There is a retention area below and left of the green that seems to collect everything from the surrounding counties.

#11 Par 3 164/145

This is a stunner-short downhill par three heading toward the bay. Bunkers on either side of the green that leans away from you and to the left. If the wind is behind you this is a tough club selection to figure because of the downhill and the wind influence. Something low with strong intention landing on the first third is the right choice. Just a beautiful par three experience.

#12 Par 4 373/328

Following the same fall line and wind factor as 11 this is a short par 4 that gets even shorter. Three wood over the center of the hill in front of you to a wide blind landing area that cascades toward the green. There is an arbitrary bunker in the right center of the fairway at about 75 yards that you cannot do anything about. Just make a free swing and see where you end up. It is likely to be pretty close to the green. The putting surface sits tucked to the left and has a decisive lean to the right so balls landing front left will work toward the center of the green. This is a very unique hole in many ways, you just have to trust your lines and make good swings.

#13 Par 407/352

This is the longer ugly sister to number 10 which you did not like very much. Sits directly below it and has the same ground sheer characteristics. There is a lone tree up the right that is your aiming point, hit the driver hard at that. Anything with left proclivity will end up in the bunker on the left corner of the dogleg with virtually no shot at the green. The second is to the same green setting as 10-well above you to the left with a left lean. It is déjà vu all over again and not a good memory at that.

#14 Par 4 305/275

One more shorty, the shortest of them all. This is a 200 yard club off the tee at the big bunker you see through the fairway on the left. Skee-ball bunker arrangement up the right is to deter those senselessly thinking of going for this green. From there you have 75 yards up the hill to a green the size of your big toe sitting perched on top of a mound. Bunkers short left and right just to keep you honest. OK, the technical part of the course is now over.

#15 Par 5 555/510

This is a five par that is similar to number 9 but less stupid. Don't be thinking of cutting any corners on this one-the right side has guard rails that are clear indication of the oblivion beyond. Drive it hard to the left and the lean will bring it to left center. Before you hit your second take in the sheer poetry of this green setting in the distance. Your three wood is across another divide to a shelved landing area starting at about 115 yards with a bunker framing the left side. If you can carry it to the top shelf you have only 75 into a green set up to the left on top of the hill. Anything left on the second or third is dead.

#16 Par 4 365/313

This is one of the more interesting par fours on the course-lots of choices on how to play it. There is a line of bunkering up the center which bifurcates the fairway. If the tee is left your choice is left, if right take the right. From the right tee box hit a driver hard up the right between the bunker on the right and the last bunker up the center spine. This will put you in a low area with a carry shot over some bunkers into a green set slightly above and to the right. The green leans from the right so I like a fade working against the hill if you can manage it. Otherwise right edge of the green is fine, he has provided a retention area there if you miss right. You will not fail to notice the palaces on the hill above you. This is the highest point on the course so these guys paid big bucks for their views. This is the life-one guy even has a practice green in his back yard.

#17 Par 4 486/467

For those of us who take in the Tournament of Champions every January with an intravenous tube for the replacement of golf nutrients while in winter golf hibernation, these last two holes are embossed in our memory as the two-hole free fall that always determines the tournament winner. Whatever it seems like in HD it is more dramatic in person. Fasten the harness, you are in for a downhill thrill ride you cannot imagine.

The first one is a 470 yard par four where you drive it to center and it will take the fall line of the hill until it stops about 300 yards away at the precipice of the environmental crease that traverses the playing line about 150 yards from the green. From there you have an enticing elevation shot over the hazard to a large green

set on a diagonal to the left. This green pitches toward you and to the left so any strong shot landing in the right center of the green will hang a Louie once it is on grass and end up left center. If for any reason you are forced to lay up on the right of the green the pitch in is straight up the incline of the green.

Once on the green the putting is relatively tame unless you are straight down grain/ down hill so pay attention to the direction of the setting sun. Take a second to look back up what you just negotiated, there is good reason you just hit the drive of your life.....that is until the next hole.

#18 Par 5 663/585

This par five driving area is like a hairpin turn on the men's downhill course at Kitzbuhel. You aim at the right tree line adjacent to the club house and let your arms be free. To your amazement your ball will hit the ground and take a hard left turn cascading in the power slot all the way to the bottom left corner of this massive driving area. From it's resting place you are left with about 235 over the corner of another environmental no-no at a left leaning green hanging over the same no-no. If you have watched this on TV the shot is 50 yards right of the green letting your three wood follow the gravitational pull toward the putting surface. The ensuing pitch is straight down the slope onto the green with a little left bias on the ground. They were good enough to collar the back of the green with a bunker that will contain any overly ambitious approach from that angle. This green is massive front to back so it is a must to have you pitch settle in the flag section of the green. Once again take a look back up the hill and witness the 150 foot drop that facilitated your current and final longest drive of your life. What an adrenaline rush these last two holes are, especially if you finished four-four to win the Nassau.

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