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## 'Next Cancún' taking shape on pristine Nayarit shores

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**(02-04) 04:00 PDT Litibú, Mexico** -- Bulldozer tracks scored the dirt road that led us to the beach through low- growing vines and tropical scrub punctuated by palm trees. A hawk glided by, barely higher than our heads, but not one footprint disturbed the gently curving crescent of white sand stretching toward the headland.

Just beyond the rise behind us, though, lay paved entrance roads, freshly planted palm trees and lantana, and a manmade lake about to be filled with water. Ground was graded and awaiting turf to become an 18-hole Greg Norman golf course. Within two years, this 413 acres of jungle, 2 miles from Punta Mita on the newly paved road to Sayulita, will host beachfront villas, luxury condominiums, shopping malls and beach clubs.

FONATUR, the government tourist development agency that created the resorts of Cancún, Los Cabos, Ixtapa, Huatulco and Loreto, revved up again under the presidency of Vicente Fox, starting a new major resort for the first time in 20 years. This time, the Nayarit coast's number came up.

Litibú -- the name of a bird in the native Huichol language -- is the first phase in the Nayarit project, which is scheduled to encompass three phases by 2025. Groundbreaking is scheduled for this year on the second phase, to be called El Capomo, about 30 miles north; the third, at La Peñita, is in between.

The palapa-roofed sales offices just inside Litibú's entrance gates stand empty, never needed because 85 percent of the parcels were scooped up within hours of their release for sale early last year. The golf course opening, which had been scheduled for December, has been pushed back to this summer.

Private homes (many destined to be vacation rentals) will dominate the lodging, but the master plan allows for five or six major hotels. Spain's Iberostar chain signed up early on; FADESA, another Spanish group that has many hotels and condominium developments in Europe, will also build a luxury hotel.

Investment in Litibú is about 90 percent foreign. Big U.S. investors weren't quick enough in this round; Sergio Tabasky, who is in charge of FONATUR's development in Loreto and is helping to oversee Litibú, said the Walt Disney Co. wanted to build a theme hotel and timeshare units and will probably come into Phase II.

In more than one sense, Litibú will be greener than its predecessors. Mexican planners are steering clear of the spring break/party crowd and going for the well-heeled tourist who will stay longer and spend more money. At the same time, they are taking new measures to avoid overwhelming the landscape or the local culture.

Tabasky said for every palm tree they take out of the jungle to make room for development, they are required by law to put five others in. Every species of plant added to the landscape has to be native to the region.

An integral part of the project is building a desalination plant, sewage treatment facilities, paved roads and sidewalks in Higuera Blanca, the nearby village whose Huichol residents are descended from the only tribe never conquered by the Spanish. FONATUR also is enlarging their health center and school building.

As McCarthy explained just before sales began at Litibú, the work is intended to improve villagers' - and visitors' -- lives without modernizing the town. Planners were careful not to interfere with its quaint character, anticipating that even free-spending tourists will want to venture from their gated enclave to take in the colors and sounds and smells of a real Mexican village.

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