**INTERNATIONAL REPORT**

**Extreme golf: Fream breaks ground in Sahara Desert**

By JAY FINEGAN

TOZEUR, Tunisia — You have to hand it to Ron Fream. The man isn’t afraid of a challenge.

This past New Year’s Day, the California-based golf architect broke ground here at this date palm oasis in the Sahara Desert. If work proceeds as planned, the Sahara’s first 18-hole course will open for play next winter.

Although Tozeur has an airport, about a dozen hotels and a mainly Berber population of 20,000, it seems rather remote. It sits on a caravanserai route from Timbuktu to Carthage — near today’s Tunisia — that dates back 3,000 years.

The Mediterranean coast is four hours to the north. Timbuktu lies 1,000 miles southwest through the Algerian Sahara.

The landscape is so other-worldly that film-maker George Lucas bought 1,000 acres near here where he shoots his “Star Wars” movies.

Weather conditions can be tough. The area gets only about two inches of rainfall per year. In the summer, daytime temperatures reach 122 degrees. But in the winter, Fream said, it’s delightful. “It will be a balmy 77 degrees here, when it’s below freezing in Paris or Helsinki and the days are only five hours long,” he said. “North African courses are like the Palm Springs of Europe. It’s becoming kind of an ‘in’ thing to go into the desert on safaris.”

Construction conditions are a bit unusual, too. “It’s just getting design ideas across when the local labor crew has no understanding of what a golf course is,” the architect said.

But Fream has prepared a master plan to clear the site-related hurdles of sandstone outcrops, eroded valleys, fine drifting sand, little existing vegetation and a rather demanding water source.

**15 YEARS TO GROUND-BREAKING**

Fream is no stranger to these parts. He has made more than 40 visits to Tunisia since he first started building courses in North Africa almost 30 years ago.

Indeed, Fream & Dale Golfplan, based in Santa Rosa, Calif., has built seven courses already in Tunisia, including a Cypress Point look-alike called Tabarka on the coast. Together, those courses handle some 300,000 rounds a year.

But those projects pale compared to the building of the Oasis Golf Club. “Somebody in Palm Springs will say, ‘Oh, we’ve built courses in the desert.’ I’ve got a golf course in Palm Springs, too,” Fream said.

“And doing golf in the desert there is kids’ stuff. It’s for junior high school boys. I picked this site 15 years ago, and it’s taken us that long just to get to ground-breaking.”

**PASPALUM TO THE RESCUE**

Water supply, oddly enough, isn’t a major concern. Fream plans to pull about one million gallons a day from a sewage treatment plant located some six miles away.

“Typically, they agreed to put in a bigger pipeline,” Fream said. “And doing golf in the desert there is kids’ stuff. It’s for junior high school boys. I picked this site 15 years ago, and it’s taken us that long just to get to ground-breaking.”

**CAMEL-PULLED CARTS**

The heavy construction machinery will come in from Tunis, but Fream will lean heavily on local labor.

“Donkey and camel-pulled carts are common around here, and we’ll use them to transport some of the construction materials,” he said. “We’ll use hand labor for the excavation of trenches and for

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Fream in Tunisia

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tree planting. Tozeur has an unemployment problem, and daily wages approximating $1 per hour will be a boost to the local economy. Long-term, we'll use a labor-intensive turfgrass maintenance program."

That labor supply will come in handy for the transplanting of 3,000 trees. "The oasis has about 200,000 date palms," Fream said. "The people don't want to pick the dates anymore, so they are kind of letting them die. We're going to move 3,000 of them and put them around the course."

The course itself will play to 7,040 yards, with five sets of tees. A valve-in-head irrigation system will help control water usage. Olive pomos and grape pomos - the remains of olive oil and wine grape pressing - and barley straw will be trucked in from the coast to provide an organic humus base. As for bunker sand - well, no problem.

BALLOON RIDES OVER THE DUNES

The course owner is a hotel and tourism entrepreneur from Tunis, who also owns Fream's course at Tabarka, set directly on the Mediterranean.

"This guy is buying a little two-engine plane," Fream said, "and he'll be able to fly golfers into Tabarka, which is on the coast near Algeria. There they can play in the sand dunes and pine trees along the shore. Then he can fly them an hour south and land in the middle of the Sahara Desert, and they'll play on the most authentic-looking desert course they're ever going to see."

Fream has high hopes that sun-seeking golfers will show up. He thinks they will, because golf isn't the only local attraction. If you want to lay off golf for a day, you can take a camel or SUV safari into the Sahara sands or float over the dunes in a hot-air balloon. "Exotic dinners at tented encampments would appeal to golfers, too," Fream said. •