

From Gloucestershire to Tunisia and back again

Dealing with contrasting sites and contrasting problems, how does a golf architect make the most of the golfing opportunities without ruining the varied environments in which he works?

Noel Forester reports

One can only imagine about the life of a golf architect and the requirement to perform when under the influence of lag, not so much induced by jet or time but by local environments.

A respected golf architect plies his trade far and wide and deals with any number of conflicting and contrasting problems as he wrestles with several different projects at any one time.

How easy it must be to jump to an all too hasty decision when standing on the windswept heights of the Cotswolds, following hard upon a flight back from Tunisia. What might there possibly be in common between the island of Djerba off the coast of southern Tunisia and the corn-fields at Minchinhampton in Gloucestershire apart from them

both tending to test the limits of the thermometer?

It cannot be easy to cast aside those extremes of climate when the summer temperatures on Djerba – Homer's island of the Lotus Eaters incidentally – can soar into the not altogether soporific 40s while the opening day in May at the new Cherrington course at Minchinhampton struggled to reach five degrees. How can an architect cope with the huge demands these extremes place not only on himself but on the grass. After all the golfer has a choice about whether to brave the elements but the grass had no such luxury.

If you continue to peel away the onion-skins of the Djerba and Cherrington projects you will discover more and more the differ-

The 8th hole at Golf de Djerba, Tunisia

ences and difficulties that an architect faces.

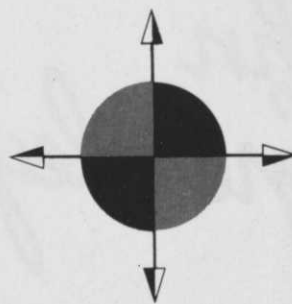
In the case of Djerba, very high temperatures; strong winds; a semi-arid site of sand and palm trees overlying limestone; a high water-table; a water source containing six grams of salt per litre – the usual tolerance for Bermuda grass being one gram per litre – and a water need of half a million gallons per day. Combined or individually these hardly suggest that the site was suitable for a golf course. For an architect, however, there is always something to be thankful for and in the case of Djerba it was the lack of conditions laid down by a planning agency.

That cannot be said to be the case at Minchinhampton where the site, included within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, was the subject of a full-scale Planning Inquiry. Permission was eventually granted subject to conditions attaching to earthworks and landscaping – no change of level greater than 1.5 metres,

fewer than ten bunkers with the sand not be visible from any public highway; reconstitution of hedgerows and stone walls; a tightly controlled tree planting scheme in consonance with the Cotswold landscape and greens and tees to be sited at a respectful distance from neighbouring properties.

The two sites had quite different soils, the one sand and broken shell, the other Cotswold brash with an alarming quantity of stones – the first job was to instigate a complete mechanical stone-picking and stone burying operation. Djerba was a ready-made golfing landscape with dunes and rolling terrain right down to the beach with a scattering of palm trees throughout. Cherrington, on the other hand, was stone-walled, treeless and at first sight not an inspiring canvas despite its Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty status. A very shallow valley floor and fairly uniform gradients were the only native material.

JONATHAN GAUNT



Golf Course Architect BA Hons Dip LA

Architect of Ramside Hall Hotel G+CC
Currently working at Linden Hall Hotel G+CC, Northumberland

**44 Stanmore Road
London E11 3BU**

**Telephone 0181 532 9181
Fax 0181 532 9553**

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If, however, you turn away from the manifold differences between the two sites and search for something which might unite them in the work of the golf architect it is clearly to do with the artificiality of the intention and how the architect integrates that artificiality with the site and defends the charge or landscape ruination. An environmental cynic would recognise the colours and textures of the one site transposed to the other and the shapes and features of the other imported back to inland Britain.

But it should not stop there. The principle aim, and it is one that would surely be shared by all golf architects is not to allow the artifice to conceal the original site. When you cannot see the origins and history or a piece of land you are playing golf over, then a large part of the spirit and purpose of the game is lost and sensitivity in design has been

surrendered to artifice, self-promotion, gimmickry and introversion.

It is not simply about leaving shadows of the former site, encouraging the golfer to play over Cotswold stone walls or thread his or her way among the

strategically retained palm trees. It is about using the character or the site as a form of discipline and restraint in the design and construction processes. It is about getting under the skin of the site and using all of the architect's experience and judgment in

defining the limits, scale, style and intensity of the artificial design which are appropriate to the particular site.

In the last analysis it is about losing part of the architect's personality in the site itself. The site is far, far more important.

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