

Gordon Child dressed up as an Arab, became acquainted with a camel, discussed poa annua and thoroughly enjoyed his trip to the European Tour's 1998 Greenkeeper Conference in Dubai.

ARABIAN Knight

Just before Christmas the European Tour invited me to join them for their Greenkeepers' Conference in Dubai. Now, up to then my knowledge of Dubai was limited to knowing where it was on the map, watching the Dubai World Cup Horse Race, and the Desert Classic Golf Tournament on TV, so I was totally unprepared for what turned out to be an exciting adventure.

On our arrival at Dubai Airport, which in itself could pass as a palace, we were taken by coach to the Jebel Ali Hotel which is about 20 kms from the centre of the city, and where the Conference was to take place. The hotel was also to be our home for the week. Jebel Ali Hotel and Golf Resort is a holiday complex of its own, where you can swim in one of many pools or in the sea from the hotel beach.

There is also a sailing beach and a nine hole golf course, soon to be extended to eighteen holes which to my surprise is looked after by an old acquaintance of mine, Nick Weller and his staff. Nick who will be well known to greenkeepers in the south west from his days at High Post and North Devon, is doing a superb job out there. He was involved in the construction before taking on the growing in and maintenance. Playing round, it was hard to find even a

weed or a divot out of place anywhere, and the surface on fairways, tees and greens were excellent.

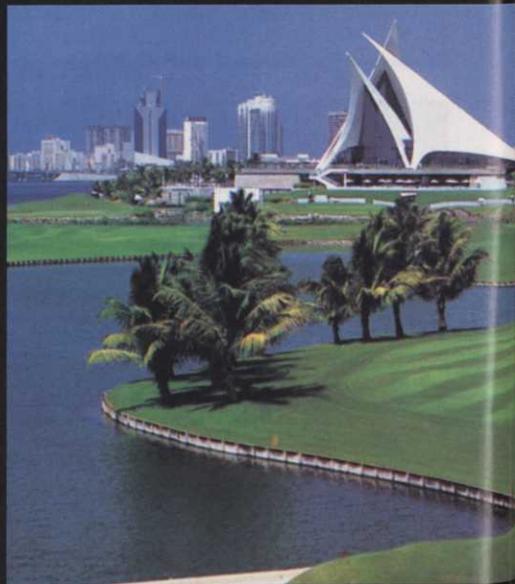
The Conference was over three days, with visits to golf courses laid on for the second day. The theme was poa annua. Do we fight it or should we manage it? The papers were given by greenkeepers, designers, the Tour Agronomist, plus talks from Scotts and Textron, who helped sponsor the week, and from the European Tour. Many of these talks were excellent.

One thing that came out loud and clear was that things don't change much over the years. There are still opposed views in the way to manage grass, but one statement which sticks in my mind was that the pro golfer does not worry about the grass species, providing the playing surface is to their liking. However, there was a good debate but I can't help thinking I have heard it all before somewhere.

I was a bit surprised when reading the Tour guidelines that the height of cut for greens should be as low as 2.6mm so that speeds of 9.5 to 10.5ft could be achieved. Surely grasses such as fescue cannot survive this cutting regime for very long. Speeds of 10 ft can be gained by other methods i.e. by verticutting and regular top dressing, and if necessary the use of rollers.

The third day we visited the Emirates and Dubai Creek Golf and Yacht Club courses where Ken Glover, who has overall responsibility, gave us a very interesting talk on how the courses were constructed and his maintenance regime. Ken is such a good speaker you could listen to him all day without getting bored. His knowledge of course management in such difficult conditions was obvious as he answered the many questions.

Surprisingly, the one thing you would think was in plentiful supply was sand, but this has to be shipped from Saudi Arabia because the sand in Dubai is totally the wrong texture for golf courses. On the other hand he has plenty of water and it is free. It all





comes from the local desalination plant and is distributed round each course by 750 computerised pop ups.

There are two courses at the Emirates Golf Club, Majlis and the Wadi. The Majlis course is a 7,101 yards par 72, and was the first grass golf course to be built in the middle east. The Wadi course measures

7,100 yards and is also a par 72. Both courses were designed by Karl Litten who has combined the natural rolling desert terrain with water hazards and well placed bunkers to produce a fine test of golf, and - at the same time allows the handicapped golfer enjoyment.

During the construction the grasses were flown in from Tifton, Georgia, in the form of millions of sprigs. Once the greens had been laid they had to be watered and regularly fed to quickly establish the sward. At the same time thousands of palm trees and washingtonians were planted and had to be frequently watered. The result is two golf courses of the highest quality.

Turning from the courses to the luxurious club house designed and built to look like a group of desert tents with every facility you could imagine. After looking around the club house and having an ice cold

drink it was time to move on to the Dubai Creek Golf and Yacht Club. Once again you are struck immediately by the magnificent club house designed mirroring the sails of the traditional Arab dhow, and has become a landmark photographed by all who visit. The Creek Golf and Yacht Club is Dubai's sporting oasis, a golf and leisure haven surrounded by the city. The club's 18 hole par 72 course of 6,839 yards was also designed by Karl Litten. The fairways at the Creek Club are lined with date and coconut palms that gives the whole place a tropical air, and visitors playing a round on this superb course, who wish to extend their golf into the night can do so on the floodlit 9 hole par 3 course, or on the three practice holes which are also under flood-lights.

The following day we had time off to do some shopping and later met at the Dubai Golf and Racing Club to play nine holes on the club's 18 hole fully floodlit course, which has a par 71 and measures 6,428 yards. The front nine is built inside the racecourse at Nad Al Sheba, the home of the \$4 million Dubai World Cup Horse Race. The back nine are quite unusual as all nine holes are played from elevated tees which gives an excellent view of each hole. The course has a look of links about it even down to the pot bunkers

around the greens, and is a very enjoyable and friendly experience.

The social side of the whole week was out of this world and thanks must go to the European Tour and the two sponsors, Scotts and Textron, who provided us with two excellent nights at their dinner and barbecue respectively. The last night, however, needs a special mention. We were all dressed up as Arabs for a night out in a desert setting, on cushions in a Bedouin tent, with wonderful food and probably too much to drink. We were entertained by a belly dancer, and we were also able to ride a camel. It was a perfect way to end the most wonderful week in Dubai, and one I will never forget.

To sum up the week the Conference was good and stimulated the mind for debate. The chance to visit and play on courses with the unique combination of golfing excellence and variety was a great privilege. There can be few places in the world that can compare with Dubai for a golfing experience and indeed for a holiday. The Jebel Ali Hotel I would recommend to anyone. For me personally it was a wonderful time meeting many old friends and hopefully making new ones. It was a great pleasure to be in their company, and finally to David Garland and Sarah Palmer, whose planning and organisation could not be faulted.

