

Match Made



in Heaven

The relocation of the World Match Play Championship to Finca Cortesin was an incredible coup for the relatively new course. But as Mark Alexander finds out, bringing one of the richest tournaments in golf to Spain wasn't all plain sailing



Finca Cortesin is a new, luxury resort located an hour's drive south of Malaga.

The course itself slipped under the radar when it opened in 2006 which is surprising considering the quality of Cabell Robinson's routing through two wide ravines. Finca's fortunes changed however when it succeeded Wentworth in hosting the World Match Play Championship in October. Not surprisingly, interest in the young upstart began to pick up.

It was after all big news - opening a new course in Spain's saturated southern fringes is one thing, but opening one and then securing a European Tour event is something else. It was a move that also prized one of the richest tournaments in golf from Wentworth's steely grasp, which at a time of manic cost cutting has to be admired.

"The initial business plan included the idea of hosting a big tournament so the course has been designed to be a championship course, with its length," said Javier Reviriego, Director General of Finca Cortesin.

"It's not a course for everyone."

At 7,445 yards off the back pegs, Finca certainly has the length to challenge the very best tour players, as Ross Fisher found on his way to clinching the title against Anthony Kim; the first to be won away from Wentworth since the tournament's inception at the Surrey course in 1964.

Describing his victory as a "long, grueling week", the 28 year old admitted the course tested every part of his game.

"This course is very demanding, not only mentally but also physically," he said.

"All departments of my game were strong: the new driver seems to be going really well, my short game was pretty sharp and there were some shots out there that really paid dividends."

But Finca has far more than just length up its sleeve. The greens typically have narrow approaches flanked by deep bunkers. The 18th is a prime example with no less than nine bunkers surrounding the putting surface. Bearing in mind, this is a 567-yard, par five finishing hole that plays up hill all the way, you get some idea of the demands placed on the players.

The 15th is another stunner. This sweeping dogleg left covers 452 yards and has its apex protected by five sprawling sand traps. Played from elevated tee positions across a ravine and up an imposing slope to a green with incredible views, this hole tests players' courage as well as their brawn.

There are plenty examples of epic holes at Finca which demand accuracy and length off the tee, but the added threat of a stiff breeze off the Mediterranean makes it an intriguing place for competitive golf. In fact, the risk-and-reward strategy that permeates its way through the course began when the decision was first made to bring the match play tournament to the Med.

"It was earlier than we had expected but the opportunity to bring a very prestigious tournament to Finca was too good to miss. We couldn't say no," said Javier.

"The last year has been hectic with the golf course. We've had to do things that would have normally taken three or four years to complete but we decided to do it because it was too good an opportunity."



Being thrust into the media spotlight has certainly helped Finca gain valuable column inches and alluring TV coverage, but as Reviriego admits, there were also risks involved.

"When you host something like this, you better be prepared," he warned.

"Especially in a situation like we have where everybody will compare us to Valderrama and Wentworth. It was certainly a way of putting us on the map quickly, but it could have also worked against us if we weren't prepared. We only have one chance to make a first impression, so we wanted to make sure everything was perfect."

The man in charge of ensuring perfection on the course is Ignacio



Javier Reviriego, Director General of Finca Cortesin.



Soto, Finca's Head Greenkeeper. After 14 years plying his trade at courses like Valderrama and Soto Grande, he moved into construction and in January 2009 was employed by Finca as a consultant to oversee the course preparations. Seven months later he was offered the job as Head Greenkeeper, and he hasn't looked back since. If the truth be told, he hasn't had time.

"There was a lot to do on the golf course - until they hired me, there wasn't a Head Greenkeeper," he admits. One of his first jobs was sorting out the drainage.

"The sub soil is a 100% expanded clay - it's like plastic so it doesn't take any water. Whenever we get a lot of rain, it runs through the two top layers, so we need proper drain-

age with gravel. Unfortunately, some parts of the course weren't originally done properly."

But the course's drainage was merely an aperitif to the main bulk of work that had to be completed before the World Match Play Championship could take place. For instance, despite the gloriously undulating landscape that affords wonderful views over both the Med and an impressive mountain range that acts as a suitably dramatic backdrop, the site was blighted by electricity pylons that serviced a nearby village. If a European Tour event was to be held at Finca, the pylons had to go.

"All the wires went underground," said Ignacio.

"It was a big job and very expen-



ABOVE: The glorious greenery and mountainous surroundings of Finca Cortesin - the new, luxury resort located an hour's drive south of Malaga.



sive, costing around €8 million. But the golf course wouldn't be the same if it hadn't been done because you now have beautiful, uninterrupted views to the sea."

The work to rebuild holes 11, 12 and 13, through which the pylons crossed, was started a year after the course opened. It was essential if disruptive work, and it wasn't the only change needed to host a premier event like the World Match Play.

"We changed the grass on the green aprons," Ignacio explained.

"Originally, they were fescue. It wasn't the right type of grass because the water quality isn't suitable and it's very difficult to play out of. So we changed it to 419 Bermuda, which we use on the fairways, tees and rough."

In fact, only the greens escaped the Bermuda treatment, covered instead with L93 bentgrass. The transition from fescue to Bermuda around the fringes took eight months and was completed well ahead of the build-up to the tournament. Cutting it a little finer was the work to rebuild the 116 bunkers, 30 of which were completed in time for the World Match Play.

"More or less all of them had problems with clay bases," Ignacio explained.

"Due to the heavy rains and underground water, the clay mixes readily with the sand creating bad

playing and drainage conditions. To rectify the situation, we're using a fairly new technique where we clean the bunker by taking out all the sand, gravel and drainage, and put in a polyethylene sheet into all the contours of the bunker right up to the edge. We then put the drainage on top of the sheet and on top of that we put a plastic net which allows the bunker to drain but won't let the clay or gravel back up. On top of the net, we're depositing new, silica sand, which is different to our old sand. It's like crushed marble. It's a looser, cleaner sand which creates much better playing conditions."

At a cost of €30/m², the sheet-and-netting option isn't cheap, but it is necessary and was being implemented right up to the start of play.

"I hope to have all the bunkers done for next year," said Ignacio.

"It's a big job, but it's the worst area of the golf course right now, and the bunkers will only get even worse if we don't do anything about it. But it's not just for the tournament, it's something we want to do to improve the course generally."

What immediately strikes you about Finca Cortesin is the quality of the service that extends throughout the resort from the front-of-house staff through to the club house and finally to the welcoming smile the attendants give you as you pick up

your buggy (which is absolutely essential). The attention to detail would be unnerving if it wasn't for the considered approach taken by the staff who convince you effortlessly that their intention is to make your stay as pleasant as possible.

It seems this policy has been wholeheartedly embraced by Ignacio and his 25 greenkeepers who busy themselves preparing the course and, more importantly, undertake improvements that would send shivers down the back of many others.

"Irrigating this course is very complicated," he continued. "We have a lot of undulations so we have many different levels to water. Getting the right amount of water to the right area is very difficult. That's why we have 2,000 sprinkler heads to adjust."

Finca Cortesin is the rarest of golf resorts. It has set its standards at the highest levels and is delivering on them across all departments.

Nowhere is this more evident than on the golf course where perfection is the goal and attention to detail is the norm.

The World Match Play Championship is set to be played at Finca until 2011 with a possible three-year extension.

If the resort's first effort is anything to go by, one of the richest tournaments in golf might have found a new permanent home.

ABOVE: Ignacio Soto, Finca's Head Greenkeeper, stands proudly in front of his immaculate course.



about the author

Mark Alexander is an award-winning golf course photographer and established journalist who works for magazines, resorts and architects. Brought up in St Andrews, it seemed inevitable that he would work in the golf industry although initially his work took him to London and various roles in publishing. Since then his work has appeared in various golf publications not to mention a host of websites and corporate marketing literature. He balances his photographic work with writing and occasionally a round of golf – with a camera never too far away.