

A continental approach

Scott MacCallum travelled to the 'Dutch Alps' in Germany to meet a recent expat who has already made a big impression at his new club

The stunning short par-4 11th surrounded by the stunning German countryside.



When I arrived at GC Schmalleberg, two hours from Dusseldorf and not too far from the German-Dutch border, the scene which greeted me was not something you'd expect to see at a typical British members' club.

Just outside the Club Shop the sister of Christiane Rorig, the Club Manager, was leading a couple of the lady members in an exercise class. As the music rang out the three were joined by Norbert Hahn, the Chairman of Greens, for some lunges and stretches.

As I say, not something you'd often see at a British club but it is indicative of the less stuffy approach there is to golf in Germany, and in particular GC Schmalleberg.

There is a warm and relaxed approach, which is something Head Greenkeeper, Denis Tweddell, has appreciated since he joined the club at the beginning of March last year.

"Everyone made me incredibly welcome. One of the guys, Charly Hennemann, who is our tree and plant specialist, even decorated our flat for us - I laboured for him, while he came with us with his jeep and trailer when we bought furniture so we could get it home," said Denis, who made the move to Germany after seven years as Assistant Head Greenkeeper, on the Ailsa Course at Turnberry, having reached a high with the 2009 Open Championship.

"People have done so much to help us settle in. The members have been welcoming and I've met up with some other expats.

"Gareth Bremner, Course Manager at GC Hummelbachae, has helped me on numerous occasions to settle into my new job and new country, while my friend and ex-workmate at Turnberry, Russell Adams, is now working with Gareth and travels up regularly to visit us here in the mountains.

"Chris Knowles, Course Manager at GC Frankfurt- Hunau, has also been someone I can call for advice on all matters of life in Germany. Funnily enough, I was sitting next to Chris at one of the workshops at Harrogate just before I moved over," he said.

Since arriving, Denis has added his brand of greenkeeping knowledge, attention to detail and customer service to the dedicated, hard-working team he inherited.

An experienced group, they are the aforementioned Charly, who has been at the club for 22 years; Karl-Heinz Pfeiffer, the mechanic and irrigation technician who has 20 years with the club and who

"can build anything"; Paul Werner Klauke, is a key player on the construction team and "is a wizard on a mini digger" with 18 years at Schmalleberg while they also have seasonal support from Franz Cordes, a farmer who sold the club the land on which the back nine was built.

Schmalleberg, is 400 metres above sea level, and is in a skiing area affectionately known as the Dutch Alps, is generally buried beneath snow from mid-December until mid to late February and initially he was keen to learn how best to protect the course during this time.

"I talked with the guys here who had experience of the snow and they told me that we needed to spray a preventative as close to the start of the snow fall as possible.

"What I've found is that it seems to be important that the ground is frozen before the snow comes because if it isn't, and there is heat in the ground, you do get more disease."

Denis admitted that there was fusarium when they came out of hibernation and that, due to the unexpected early arrival of the snowfall late last year, there was slightly more than usual, but that

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Denis Tweddell

that there was almost an understanding among the members and the rest of the staff that this was acceptable and that it was soon replaced by much improved greens.

The course is on two distinct nines. The front nine was opened in 1989 and is tree-lined and quite tight while the newer nine, opened in '95 is more open and expansive.

"The back nine has finer grasses and the greens are not quite so thatchy and tend to fare a lot better, but the older greens were probably not built as well as the new ones and can be quite soft," said Denis, who had studied German in the 90s, but has seen his ability to speak the language improve significantly over the last 12 months.

"There are not too many English speakers in this area so speaking





the language was vital and has helped me integrate much more quickly,' said Denis, who revealed that watching the German version of *Come Dine with Me* had done much to improve the family's skills and offer up tips to German behaviour.

Along with the team, Denis has already set about improving the surfaces with some micro-tining and slitting.

"We are planning to use the Graden tractor-mounted scarifier twice this season on the older greens in conjunction with trying the compost teas on all our greens."

"We have increased the frequency and type of aeration and have found the sarrel rollers an important tool for keeping the surfaces open. We do alternate the sarrel rollers with the verti cut units but aim to sarrel roll once a week during the season."

The biggest project the team has tackled in the time Denis has been at Schmallenberg has been to lengthen the course by adding a new tee to each of the 18 holes.

"When I first arrived, Ted Coffren, our Californian pro, said that the club wanted to lengthen the course with a view to attracting an EPD Tour event and making the course more attractive to the better players in the area," said Denis, who has already demonstrated his playing

pro prowess by winning several medals at the club and seen his handicap drop to 5.

"The club also benefited from the arrival of Joachim Walter and Richard Feige, the extremely proactive Club President and Vice President, who took up their roles just before Denis arrive and whose input has been invaluable."

EDP is the German National Tour and one which current World Number 1, Martin Kaymer, won as recently as 2006.

"We walked round the course with the committee, Ted and Norbert, and it was daunting because it soon became apparent that they wanted new tees everywhere and they wanted them done before the end of the season with a view to opening them this April," said Denis who never forgets how lucky he was to work with such knowledgeable Course Managers, Head men and senior greenkeepers at Turnberry and Bonnyton GC where he started his greenkeeping career.

But the club pulled together to make the project a success.

"Norbert knew a guy who had an excavator and he did much of the earth work and heavy moving for us, while we got some hard core from a local farmer, who was a friend of one of our members. On top of that we got topsoil from one of

LEFT PAGE TOP TO BOTTOM:

The short par-3 course which has attracted so many new golfers

The land for the proposed new 9 holes

Denis with the team including Chairman of Green, Norbert Hahn, back right

THIS PAGE ABOVE:
The par-3 14th from the new tee

BELOW:
Charly Hennemann's superb tee work

our members who had a construction company and he even delivered it to where we were digging out on the course.

"The work also coincided with a hot drought spell last June so we could use the time we would have spent cutting fairways and tees."

All in all it added significantly to the overall maximum length of the course and created some monster holes. The par-5 6th, for example, is uphill and into the prevailing wind is now over 600 yards from the tips, while there are several other holes over 500 yards long, testing





even the most consistent and long drivers.

As a result the course has been rated the 10th most challenging in Germany and the toughest in its local region.

Although Denis has spent nine years at one of the top golf venues in the world he has picked up one or two tips since moving to Germany, not least the dew clearing in the morning.

“Here we have a buggy with a rope about 20 metres dragged behind and the buggy does a couple of circuits around the green and the rope removes the dew in record time.

“The driver just jumps out and removes the pin and the whole course can be done in an hour. I can’t see a downside to it at all,” explained Denis.

Ever progressive, the club, which also boasts an excellent covered driving range, also had plans at an advanced stage to create an additional nine holes on an excellent piece of land close to the newer nine holes.

An architect has produced drawings and there is an agreement in place with the farmer who owns the land to purchase it when the members approve the project.

Despite now having the weapons in terms of length to test the best, the club does not ignore golfers at the other end of the spectrum and has been extremely pro-active in its attempts to attract more people to the game of golf.

“Over 60% of our members are over 50. That is too high, while 23% are between 31 and 50,” explained Christiane, who last year set about addressing the problem.

She introduced a series of competitions for beginners, mostly young adults, on the club’s six hole par-3 course lasting over the summer months with free use of clubs and rudimentary lessons.

“We charged 99 euro per team of three and once they had spent some time learning the basics we had a series of competitions – Scramble, Best Drive, Alternate Drive, Individual – held between May and September.

“We gave them free use of the equipment and they could play on the course any time they liked over the period.

“We had barbecues at the prize presentations and everyone had great fun. From the people who played last year we got 10 new members and 10 more are seriously considering joining,” she said.

As for dress code, Christiane is keen that nothing is put in their way to prevent new people from taking up the game.

“I have no problem with wearing jeans on the golf course – sorry – and when people ask me what to wear, I say jeans, a polo or a t-shirt is ok with me at any time. I love jeans and wear them most days,” she revealed.

“Strict dress rules don’t make the game accessible.”



ABOVE: Dew clearing the Schmallenberg way.

Christiane is delighted with the club’s new Head Greenkeeper. “He has created a great team spirit and has brought fun to the job,” she said.

While missing life at Turnberry and all his old colleagues, Denis and his new wife, Dawn, and 10-year-old, Logan, have not regretted their move to Germany for one minute and is grateful for all the support he has received.

“We really like the lifestyle. Over here family and hobbies are just as important as jobs and things are a little more relaxed.”

It may be relaxed, but you can be sure that Denis will continue to give 100% to ensure that Golfclub Schmallenberg develops along the successful path it has already started.