

Dubai is building championship courses overlooked by holiday homes

By Graham Norwood

Wednesday, 28 May 2008

Welcome to Dubai, the self-proclaimed leading golf destination of the world. Well, perhaps. Purists may still invoke the Algarve in Portugal, the Spanish Costa del Sol or Florida in the US as rivals for that title. But no one can dispute Dubai's ambitions. A decade ago this emirate had only two courses – and one of those consisted purely of sand – but now those days have gone and there are seven championship golf courses with a further 11 scheduled for completion by 2012.

Many are designed and endorsed by leading golfers including Tiger Woods and Ernie Els; names such as these attract British buyers wanting homes close to the greens.

"Dubai issues around 1,100 residency visas on a daily basis, mainly for people moving there to start working in the corporate sector. Golf is a corporate sport, so with all these people coming to live and work there, it's becoming a massive draw," notes Gareth Milton of homes sales website www.propertyshowrooms.com.

Other Dubai property experts such as Oliver Hickey – UK sales director for Profile, which markets homes around a new Els-designed course – says you cannot readily compare the city-state with "traditional" golf destinations such as the Costa del Sol or the Algarve because Dubai is a regional business hub and offers unique attractions.

"The Emirates Golf Club was the first grass course in the Middle East. It's the home of the European PGA Desert Classic which attracts all of the major PGA players, even Tiger Woods. The other reasons clients are attracted to Dubai are high rental income, excellent capital growth, the climate and the soon-to-be-opened Dubailand – the world's largest theme park. And of course, Dubai's tax free status," says Hickey.

So far, Dubai's courses have unashamedly followed a US style majoring in creature comforts rather than the more functional style adopted in the UK and Europe. So expect to use a motorised golf cart fitted with a sat nav to measure shots, while you can stop at beverage halts and half-way houses to revive you mid-course.

What is different is that only a few of the courses have US or European-style villas on the fairway edges – most, instead, have blocks of apartments overlooking at least several holes, and occasionally with a birds' eye view of an entire course.

Those properties close to the course, be they villas or apartments, share the same advantages of golf-side homes across the world. Security is good, the local area is very quiet, views are pleasant and rental potential to golf holidaymakers is strong for those owners wanting to let out their properties.

The 18-hole Ernie Els course which is going to be at the centre of Dubai Sports City will have four luxury developments nearby – Bermuda Views, Profile Residence, Stadium Point and Eagle Heights – all overlooking

the course. The homes' features are standard for Dubai with roof-top swimming pools, fitness centres, Jacuzzis and extensive underground parking. All these will be completed by early 2010.

Dubai authorities are also going some way to address environmental concerns over the proliferation of golf courses in this desert region.

Nakheel, one of the largest golf resort developers in Dubai, has launched a division to develop courses that are "eco-friendly and follow environmentally-sensitive principles and practices" according to Wahid Attalla, the firm's executive director of operations. Now Nakheel's chairman, Sultan Bin Sulayem, has joined the board of the Environmental Institute of Golf, an international body to promote "green" courses.

"Water that is used for greens and fairways is desalinated from the sea, and does not affect local consumption. This has been happening in Spain, but not to the same extent as Dubai," says Gareth Milton of www.propertyshowrooms.com.

"Reclaimed land for beach-front golf developments has been criticised in the past for having foundations which were not eco-friendly – marine life was being damaged because the sea was not able to circulate. But now, the foundation blocks incorporate holes within hexagonal blocks, allowing the sea to circulate, and marine life to exist naturally," explains Milton.

There is one other critical issue to mention about Dubai golf – that is, how well it is funded.

In 2009 the city-state will host the world's richest golf tournament, the European Tour's \$10m (£5.3m) Dubai World Championship. With prize money like that, the area's courses are kept in pristine condition so they offer fantastic playing experiences for anyone buying a home close by.

The result of all this funding, publicity and course construction has been an explosion of interest in the sport.

There are around 7,000 members of Dubai golf clubs, some 95 per cent of which are expatriates. Most clubs offer special rates to holiday home owners who spend only part of the year in the UAE. Golf course revenues in Dubai were \$8.8m (£4.6m) in 2006, compared to \$1.3m (£0.7m) in Great Britain and Ireland, according to a recent study by KPMG.

"The influx of expatriates from traditional golfing countries such as the UK, Ireland and Australia, and the interest of international golf tourists, continues to fuel the golf boom," says Andrea Sartori, head of KPMG's Golf Advisory Services Team in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. "Dubai, in particular, has led the way in positioning itself as a global destination for golf," adds Sartori.

Don't tell the Portuguese, Spanish or Americans, but perhaps Dubai deserves that "world's best" title after all...

For more information, visit www.dubaigolf.com, www.traveldubai.com and www.golftoday.co.uk

Three to view

Apartments overlooking The Els Club, the first completed venue within Dubai Sports City. Prices from £131,900, completion due in 2009, through Profile Europe (UK) (020-7493 5577; www.profile.ae)

Bermuda Views, again overlooking The Els Club and cricket stadium in Dubai Sports City.

Prices from £110,000, through Property Showrooms (0800 047 0597; www.propertyshowrooms.com).

Arabian Ranches, (pictured above) houses and self-build villas in a desert-side complex with an 18-hole course by Ian Baker-Finch and Jack Nicklaus Design. Prices from £243,200 through Hamptons International (020-

7758 8447; www.hamptons-international.com).

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