

TEEING UP IN TUNISIA



Over recent years, the number of high quality golf courses in Tunisia has blossomed together with first class hotels, marinas and other facilities to ensure a first rate holiday.

David Whyte snatches up his clubs and samples what's on offer.

Tunisia has always been a soft touch for invaders. The Romans, the Vandals, the Spanish, the Turks and the French all visited Tunisia's gentle, unprotected coasts and enjoyed it so much they decided to stay-for several centuries.

Now, quite independent of foreign rule and having had no invasions for some years, Tunisia is hoping to attract a different kind of visitor to its shores. The spiked boots of an army equipped only with clubs and tiny white projectiles are already echoing through the changing rooms of the country's new clubhouses. Golf is a major target in Tunisia's current tourism program and over the next few years it hopes to turn itself into the golf vacation Mecca of the Mediterranean.

Golfing blind spot

It is fair to say Tunisia is still in its golfing infancy, although the first international course opened in 1980. The country had been a blind spot on my golfing map, not attributing to it anything more than hot holidays stretched out on the beach. On consideration, the location is ideal, a long, coastal fringe of 810 miles with temperate sunshine and tepid seas,

especially in the months when British courses are either cartwheel deep in mud or bound by frost. With contemporary accommodation and the spontaneous friendliness of the Tunisian people, it seems an ideal nursery to evolve a new golf destination.

We came like golfing wise men to see how this new arrival was progressing. With a target of about twenty, there are six golf facilities in play at the moment and a new development scheduled to open each year between now and the turn of the century. Having seen some unfortunate results when golf courses and their attendant facilities were too rapidly developed, with greens as lumpy as quilts and where putting is pointless, we were keen to cast a paternal eye over Tunisia's new tracts and check for signs of any puerile weakness.

As he drove us through the Tunis traffic, I noticed our coach

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driver wearing a permanent expression of mischief. As with any foreign country there are nuances of local driving best left to the locals and car rental can be slightly expensive while taxi or coach hire quite cheap. Outside, the men sat tranquilly sipping strong mint tea at sidewalk cafes while the charge of modern Tunis life rattled around them. We drove from the airport to the coastal town of Hammamet and, like true golfing addicts, decided to get in a round before checking into the hotel.



Golf Cytrus

Golf Cytrus is the first 45 hole golf center in Tunisia stretching around six lakes and 225 acres of live trees and natural conifer forest. The clubhouse is cool, elegant and Tunisia contemporary while the three courses fan around it. We tried out the appropriately named Les Oliviers course. Its front nine covers an open plateau, exposed to the warm winds that skirt the Golf of Hammamet or blow up from the Sahara. The fairways twist through groves of olive trees leaving tight drives and some difficulty in picking the correct line from the tees over natural roughs. At 6,800 yards there is a good combination of stretching par 4's and testing par 3's – the par 5's are par 5's. What with a compact little 9 hole executive course used mainly for the golf school, a practice area and driving range, Golf Cytrus offers just about everything a golfer could need. Golfplan – Fream & Dale provided the creative, naturalistic design.

Hammamet Resort

The evenings in Tunisia are particularly special when you have left behind miserable winter weather. We dined outdoors to the timbre of a native quartet and were indulged in an entrancing display of belly-dancing while trying to consume Koucha l'il Kolla, a traditional specialty sprinkled with rosemary and spices and cooked up in a clay pot which is ceremonially broken at the table. Tunisia wine is inexpensive and quite strong at around 14% and soon, we too were dancing, despite our stuffed bellies.

Most of Tunisia's current and future golfing facilities are located on the eastern coastal region, a short drive from



Tunis airport. Nestled in its protective gulf and only a short drive from the Golf Cytrus complex, the town of Hammamet is Tunisia's oldest tourist resort and an ideal location to combine golf with other leisure pursuits. The coastline is clean with a superb, scimitar-shaped beach stretching around the bay, tolerably cool in the summer with comforting warm weather throughout the winter months. The town is full of bustle with plenty of colorful entertainment in the evening. The local architecture is eye-catching.

The 18-hole Yasmine course, also near Hammamet, offers wide fairways with multi-tiered greens that are a major test of the short game. Easier off the tees, Yasmine becomes a shot-maker's delight when trying to avoid the water hazards to set up on the green for a reasonable putt. This course is less eye-catching than Golf Cytrus, but is surely a good playing opportunity.

Port El Kantaoui

A short drive from Tunisia's third largest city, Sousse, is Port El Kantaoui.

One of the finest of seaside resorts surrounded by exotic white hotel complexes and an Andalucian-styled marina, Port El Kantaoui attracts yachts from as far off as Seattle and San Francisco.

Jasmine sellers dressed in traditional apparel complete with fez offer white bouquets of pungent blooms in the marketplace surrounding the marina with its many smart cafes, restaurants and craft shops all built in keeping with traditional Moorish architecture. This is the place to come and see or be seen whilst strolling around the sleek yachts. The local wines are an exceptional bargain.

On the fringe of the Sahel area, the "sea of Olives", the courses at Port El Kantaoui were opened in 1980 and have hosted the PGA Open from 1982-85. With 27 championship holes, they are divided into three sections, the Red, Yellow and Blue. Designed by Ronald Fream of Golfplan, California (who first helped select this resort golf site in 1973), each section offers slightly different playing conditions reflecting the surrounding terrain. There is clever use of the lake, which fronts the clubhouse leaving tricky finishing chips on both the Red and Blue courses. Some fairways run amongst the olive plantations while others skirt the sandy beaches providing gorgeous, palm-fringed greens.

The elevated inland holes have superb views to the port and the sea. During the high season, the winter months, the course is turned into one 18 hole for low handicappers leaving a 9 hole for the less adept. This is rotated between the three tracts daily and as each section provides plenty of challenge and interest, no one loses out. This course plays in a demanding way from the rear tees. It is very compatible from the regular tees.



Sousse diversion

For diversion, a trip into nearby Sousse is essential, an ancient fortress city built by warrior monks. The souk or marketplace is one of the most exotic in North Africa where souvenir hunters come to indulge in the national sport of haggling. The prize for the winner is a good deal on curly-toed slippers or any size of stuffed toy camel, which you later wonder why you haggled so vehemently for. For more sensible purchases there are some excellent lace vendors, silver-smiths, carpet weavers and perfumiers.

Forty-five minutes drive south of Port El Kantaoui taking the old road to the Sahara, you will find another of Tunisia's more established courses at Monastir, another holiday resort town with a seafront promenade, modern marina and ancient fortress. This is, yet again, a Ronald Fream and Golfplan designed course and a surprising test of strength and length for average golfers. The surrounding landscape is rugged while the fairways are green and sumptuous, a feature of most Tunisian courses. The design is totally distinct from Golf Cytrus and Golf El Kantaoui. Only in the last of the summer months does the grass reflect the high temperatures and give up its lushness, although all courses are fitted with modern computerized sprinkler systems that keep both the greens and fairways in good condition. At Monastir there is also a three-hole practice area and driving range. Ancient Roman ruins and 600 year-old olive trees add local interest to this course.

Tabarka

If you wish to avoid the busy east coast resorts, Tabarka is Tunisia's quieter retreat on the northwest corner. As yet undeveloped as a tourist attraction, it is a typical Mediterranean town with a strong French influence and a charming championship 18 hole course. Hotels are being built along the beachfront so its serenity may be short-lived. The course is still developing and needs another year or so to settle but it is a pleasant round if you are planning to tour this area and enjoy its natural attributes.

Tabarka is planning another 9 holes to open soon and ultimately this will be another excellent winter hideaway with a full compliment of facilities. The Tabarka course is set amongst huge sand dunes with direct seaside exposure playing among pine and oak trees. It is more an Algarve or Sintra and Estoril type course than North Africa. It could



be a Scottish links layout except for the good weather.

Tabarka is another Ronald Fream-Golfplan design. It seems that Fream was very actively involved in bringing golf to Tunisia from 1973 onward. Each of his design solutions is individual, not repetitive as one might think. It is worth noting that Fream and his Golfplan firm were also the architects of such noted courses as Golf Disneyland-Paris, the EPGA tour qualifying course at Massane-Montpellier in southern France and also the superb Golf de Fregate resort course at Bandol-St.-Cyr on the French Mediterranean coast. Playing Fream's Tunisia efforts will be memorable.



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