

Sandtraps: Abu Dhabi Golf Club (this page) was one of the leading lights in attracting golf tourism to the UAE; now other emirates like Qatar (opposite) are rapidly following suit



How does your desert grow?

Golf tourism is enjoying a boom and nowhere more so than in the Middle East, where course architects are creating masterpieces from its sands. **Tim Glynne-Jones** discovers that growing grass in the desert is actually less contrary than it sounds

There's a revolution taking place in the normally sedate environment of the golf industry. The sweet symphony of sounds that grace the golf course – from the pleasing swish of a club head cutting through the air, to the satisfying plop of a ball finding the cup – is being augmented by an orchestra of heavy machinery and the percussive crack of high explosives.

Now new territories, far beyond the usual lush, green landscapes of Western Europe and North America, are being reshaped beyond recognition into the championship courses of tomorrow. Golf is going global.

India, Pakistan, North Africa and the Middle East are getting excited about golf, their enthusiasm fuelled by the ambitious plans of real estate developers and the tourism industry. In December 2007, the Emaar MGF Ladies Masters took place in Bangalore, India, with 12 of the 114 places reserved for Indian professionals. This was groundbreaking in promoting and encouraging golf in India. As William Rattazzi, CEO of property developer Emaar MGF, said, "The tournament... could well mark the beginning of a golfing revolution at a time when India is emerging as one of the world's favoured destinations for investment, business and tourism."



The Ladies Masters was organised by Golf in Dubai, an organisation set up primarily to promote the game in the rapidly developing Arab emirate. Confirmation that its efforts are bearing fruit came a year earlier, in December 2006, when none other than Tiger Woods, the world's number one golfer, announced that he was moving into course design and his first project would be in Dubai. Scheduled to open in 2009, the course, called Al Ruwaya, would be part of a \$790million residential golf course development called Tiger Woods – Dubai, which itself would form a part of Dubailand, the massive tourism, leisure and entertainment development, which will include a ski slope under a glass dome and is scheduled for completion in 2020. Aside from the money he stands to make by putting his name to the project, Woods is pursuing his own mission to spread the game around the world. For Dubai, it is the ultimate endorsement of the fact that,

We had carte blanche – we lifted, made bumps, made hollows, played god basically

in a very short time, it has mastered the art of turning the desert green.

As Woods said, “I am excited about the challenge of transforming a desert terrain into a world-class golf course.” But, magician though he may be with a club in his hands, it won't be Woods doing the transforming. That particular trick will fall to the golf course architects from his company Tiger Woods Design.

Somebody who knows more than most about the task that faces them is Peter Harradine of Harradine Golf, whose project list includes courses in Pakistan,

Shifting sands: the Abu Dhabi Golf Club (this page) was white with sand before Harradine Golf came and blazed the trail for new course designers like Tiger Woods Design

India, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Morocco and several in the UAE, where he has broken new ground, literally. He was commissioned by His Highness Dr Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi to build a nine-hole course at the Sharjah Golf and Shooting Club. The club is closely linked to the ambitious Qanat Al Qasba development, a cultural, leisure and entertainment destination, built on a canal and featuring a near 200ft high observatory wheel, the ‘Eye of the Emirates’.

“Despite what people think, growing grass on sand is the easiest thing that you

Photography: Getty Images



can do,” explains Harradine about the presumed difficulty. “It's a lot easier than it is on peat or clay or topsoil. I haven't used peat for the last 35 years. I use 100 per cent sand. The only thing that you need is the right type of sand, the right granulometry and, of course, water.”

Harradine's first project in the UAE was the Abu Dhabi Golf Club, described as “an oasis of tranquility and beauty carved out of the desert”. But that wasn't how Harradine found it.

“Abu Dhabi was white with salt when we took it over; 135 hectares of salt. We almost had a carte blanche. We brought in over nine million cubic metres of sand and lifted the whole area, made bumps, made hollows, played god basically and just created the whole course. We lifted it up



to a safe level where it wouldn't get damaged by salt water, taking the sand from the dunes 10 miles up the road. Basically, we got rid of a dune and brought it somewhere else.”

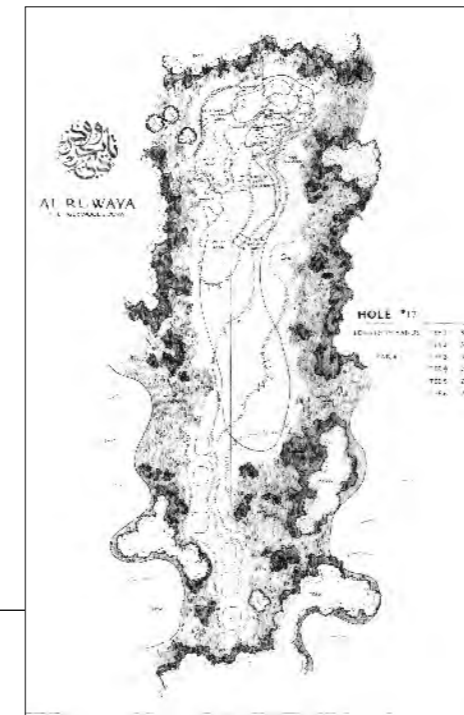
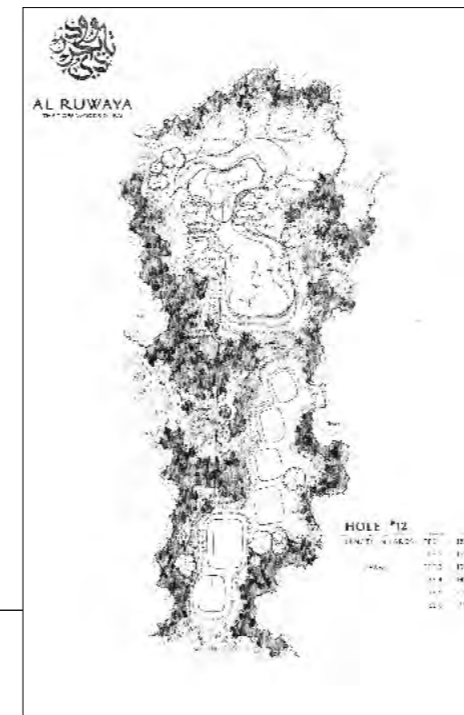
The moulding and shaping of the dunes is relatively easy with the heavy machinery



available today. “A hundred years ago, they wouldn't have dreamt of building a golf course in the desert.” Once the sand is shaped, the irrigation and drainage put in, it's time to apply the grass. Harradine uses a method called ‘sprigging’, laying down grass roots rather than seed and lightly covering it. Constant research is producing better grass hybrids all the time, but has yet to develop a seed to produce the grass Harradine wants – a mixture of Bermuda and Paspalum, fast growing, loves heat and is salt tolerant – so he has to resort to the more labour-intensive sprigging.

“I brought a little bag back from California about 20 years ago and I'm

Earning his stripes: his experiences at Emirates Golf Club (above) had a hand in inspiring Tiger Woods to choose Dubai for his first course design Al Ruwaya (left)





Golf has become a very dangerous game. Improved balls go a hell of a long way

Nahyan said of the Abu Dhabi Golf Championship, played on Harradine's championship course at Abu Dhabi Golf Club, "This is an important element in our strategy for the development and diversification of our tourism infrastructure in coming years. Golf tourism continues to grow rapidly around the world and keen golfers are constantly on the lookout for new destinations."

He added, "Abu Dhabi's new courses, several of them designed to championship standards, will be an integral feature of a number of the major development zones that will transform the emirate in the years

Golf for all: Abu Dhabi Golf Club (above) and Emirates Golf Club, Dubai (below) are championship courses, but all standards are catered for in the UAE



Photography: Getty Images

sure we've done half of Dubai with it," he says. "It's a bit difficult in the beginning when you've just sprigged; if there's a sandstorm the next day, then there's a lot of resprigging to be done."

But once the grass has taken, which happens quickly in favourable conditions, it can be ready to play on in as little as four months. In fact, says Harradine, it is a lot easier to grow grass in Dubai than in the UK – that green and pleasant land.

"Here, don't forget, you know for sure tomorrow's going to be hot, and the day after tomorrow and the next day; you just control the water. In Europe, it rains one day, it's hot the next day, it showers the next day, then it's hot again. You have no control and that makes it very difficult."

Water control comes courtesy of a Middle Eastern speciality, something Harradine feels the Europeans could benefit from. In the Middle East, his courses are irrigated by 99 per cent sewage treated effluent. The utterly reliable sun does the rest.

Tiger Woods – Dubai is a partnership between Tiger Woods Design and property developer Tatweer, a member of Dubai Holding, whose executive chairman Mohammed Al Gergawi struck a now familiar chord in announcing the project. "This initiative reinforces the great development pace that Dubai has achieved within diverse domains to become one of the most recognised cities in the world."

The entire region is on a mission. In Abu Dhabi, HH Sheikh Sultan Bin Tahnoon Al



"Golf has become a very dangerous game," says Harradine, who used to play off four. "Before, when people didn't have any control over the ball, at least it didn't go far. Now, with improved balls and improved clubs, it goes a hell of a long way. All the developers in Spain and America are putting nets up."

The only safe alternative, he says, is more land. "It's a constant fight between the developer and us because the developer wants more real estate and we want more golf course." Allied to this is the task of catering for diverse abilities. Prestige events like the Dubai Desert Classic and the Abu Dhabi Golf Championship need courses that will test the touring pro. But letting a wayward amateur loose on a championship course can be enough to



kill their enthusiasm for the game forever. Striking the right balance is a tall order.

While most of these golf developments are being built for the expat and tourist markets, the pursuit and passion for golf is growing among the local population. Woods, who knows the region well having played the Dubai Desert Classic four times

ahead. Among those announced already are two courses on Saadiyat Island, three on Yas Island and a 27-hole course on Reem Island, with others in the pipeline."

Not surprisingly, Harradine Golf, which built its reputation producing courses in mainland Europe, has set up an office in the UAE. And it is not alone. But building courses to cater for all the needs of property developers like Emaar and Tatweer is no easy task. There's competition over the land available, for a start. Harradine reckons on 250-270 acres for a course with real estate and the need for space is growing ever more important.

Pro plus: Paul Casey (top right) and Sergio Garcia (right) at the Abu Dhabi Golf Championship, the success of which is spawning many new courses, including two on Saadiyat (above)



and won it in 2006, is keen to encourage local participation. "It's a relatively new sport to the region and knowing that much of the population doesn't play golf was very appealing," he said of his decision to build his first course in Dubai. "I want Al Ruwaya to excite people about coming out to play."

So while the sands of the UAE grow ever greener, where next for the golf revolution? Although Dubai and other emirates have shown you can build a golf course anywhere on Earth, the truly great courses require truly great sites. The likes



course through the rocks, but left as many as possible intact. "There's a rock there that looks like an old lady and another like an elephant – incredibly big rocks – they are going to remain there because of golf. The rest of the city has been flattened for development; we're preserving those monuments. There have been a lot of abuses with ecology, I understand the concerns, but unfortunately we, the golfing community, are paying the price of the abuses of the industrialists and the farmers and it's not fair. We'll never get a site like this in our lives again."

Nevertheless, the skills that golf course architects like Peter Harradine have developed in the UAE have opened up the world to golf. The sky is the limit. Indeed, they could even build a golf course on the moon, although, as Harradine points out, the lack of gravity may affect your game.

There's a rock there that looks like an old lady and another like an elephant

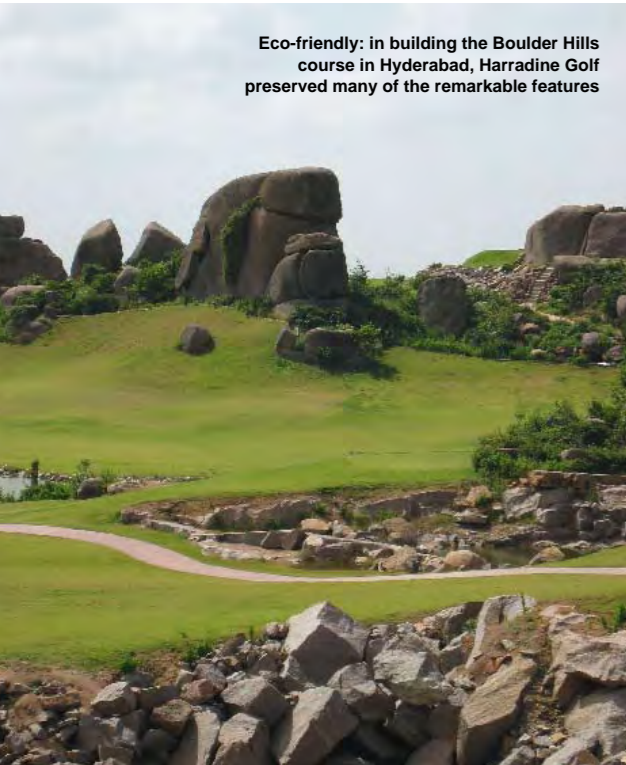
of St Andrews, Pebble Beach and Augusta benefit from their location amid natural beauty and dramatic changes in elevation. Such sites are getting harder to come by, especially with the ecology movement far more powerful than when those courses were built. But Peter Harradine believes he has found one in Hyderabad, India.

Boulder Hills is an Emaar MGF development, and the clue to its appeal is in the name: the golf course is carved out among a collection of giant boulders.

"It's an incredible site," says Harradine, who used 13 tons of dynamite to blast a



Eco-friendly: in building the Boulder Hills course in Hyderabad, Harradine Golf preserved many of the remarkable features



Photography: Tony Gentile / Reuters; www.harradine-golf.com



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