

OUT OF THIS WORLD

CHRIS WHITE IS ONE OF THE MOST EXPERIENCED GOLF COURSE GENERAL MANAGERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST. HE WAS IN THE UAE AT THE BEGINNING, WHEN GOLF COURSES STARTED TO MUSHROOM THROUGHOUT THE REGION. NOW CHRIS IS DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS OF THE AYLA PROJECT IN AQABA, JORDAN, ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING DEVELOPMENTS THE MIDDLE EAST HAS EVER SEEN.

Worldwide Golf: What was your golfing background in the UK?

Chris White: I was born and brought up in Buckinghamshire, South East England. At the age of 14, I needed a part-time weekend job (in addition to my paper round and milk round) so I applied at the garden centre. But had to be 15, whilst my local 45-hole pay-and-play golf club were happy for me to dust shelves. So it all began. After doing my A-Levels at school I went on to study Business, Finance and Marketing whilst also taking the Professional Golfers Association three-year programme to become a Fully Qualified Professional. Having fulfilled the role of a Club Professional I also worked for a golf course design company, 'OnCourse Design,' who were positioning themselves well for farmers looking to turn arable land into pay-and-play golf courses in the late 1980s. I was involved in three great courses that still operate to this day, one of which I operated as Club Manager for more than four years. My big break came when the PGA of Europe put me forward to head up a new Tony Jacklin-designed facility in Istanbul – and a great Turkish chapter of my life began in 1994. I was approached by Starwood in August 1998 whilst in Istanbul and was offered the position of Director of Golf at the then 36-hole Abu Dhabi Golf Club. After a few delays I finally joined on 27th October 1999. The Emirates was a career dream and, without doubt, it was a great decision to make. To have headed the construction, pre-opening and operation of three world class golf venues certainly helped to make those dreams come true.

WWG: You hosted the Abu Dhabi Senior Tour Championship in October 2000 as Director of Golf at Abu Dhabi GC when golf in the Middle East was in its infancy - what are your memories of those times?

Chris White: A crazy blur would be the best way to describe those days, purely because we had three months of pre-opening activity before finally opening Abu Dhabi's 36-hole facility (9 holes were floodlit). It was great fun but incredibly busy. We had more than 500 members from day one and double shotgun start events running on both courses every weekend. We were doing 70,000-plus rounds a year.

WWG: You were at Al Hamra GC, Ras Al Khaimah GC, another Peter Harradine-designed course, for a number of years. How different was it to Abu Dhabi and what was the real test?

Chris White: I joined Al Hamra literally for the breaking of new ground. Peter is a great architect to work with and is passionately involved in his designs. To work with the golf course construction team, overseeing the design and building of the clubhouse, academy and marina was a great experience, whilst ensuring that we interphase with the residential and retail developments that were running in parallel to the golf course design work. It was a very different market and audience but I believe it was a success from the start. We realised that we had a small local community but an attractive offering to those who were prepared to travel 60 minutes from Dubai – and they certainly made the trip in numbers. I secured all the 'Title Opens' and the business snowballed into what it is today, which is a fantastic mid-range resort with probably as many international rounds as some of the other 'big name' courses.

WWG: What took you to Yas Links and construction the company, Aldar, where you were totally involved in the project from the concept to the planning to the opening of the course?

Chris White: I was approached by Aldar. The concept and appointment of designer Kyle Phillips had already been made, the construction tender process was just coming to an end and the golf course contractor was being appointed. I headed the golf division of Aldar and worked initially with the development team through construction and clubhouse architect appointment, including the fit-out over five very successful years of operation which left me with some wonderful memories in helping to create such a world-class facility. Aldar were a great empowering company. They recognised the skills-set certain individuals had and, in my case, trusted me to deliver on my knowledge. I was very fortunate to be able to work closely with the now CEO, Mohammed Al Mubarak, who, despite the fact that he was not a golfer, fully supported the strategy and decisions that were made. ▶