



As recent editions of GCNI have discovered, there is a great deal of talk about golf expansion in Eastern Europe. Trevor Ledger recently caught up with the France based English golf course architect, Jeremy Pern and discussed the issue at some length. Pern is currently working on golf course design contracts in Hungary and Croatia and has recently done consultancy work in Slovenia and Romania. He also has contracts at various stages of advancement in

Norway, France, Austria, Germany, Belgium and Mauritius.

GCNI: The expansion of golf in Eastern Europe is beginning to gather pace - why is that?

JP: I am not sure that it is. I would like to see some statistics on dates of opening new golf courses with some sort of coefficient for number of holes and annual investment since 1990. Since the Berlin wall came down there has been a steady increase in interest in golf, but actually the number of courses developed remains pretty small. What has changed is the type of investor and the type of projects. Until quite recently one had very little idea as to where the money came from. Now one feels that more serious businessmen are replacing the eccentric, if not shadowy investors of yesteryear.

It's a sensible organic growth, not the dumb explosions that we saw in France, UK and Germany 10 - 15 years ago. There is a lot of talk but few signs of serious acceleration in investment and construction. The number of full length 18 hole courses in Eastern Europe is tiny. There seems to be an increase in 9 hole and Driving Range DIY courses - which is how it should be. Architects and developers tend to inflate expectations and each project gets talked about for years. Lots of smoke - not much fire.

GCNI: Given the economic background of many former Eastern Bloc countries, how can anyone justify a luxury item such as golf?

JP: Golf is not a luxury item anymore, if indeed it ever was. Elitist, expensive and exclusive perhaps - but not luxury. In most of Europe anyone can play golf at no great cost. It is part of our suburban landscape and an integral part of one of the world's biggest industries - tourism. No serious resort or hotel developer in Europe can

afford to ignore golf as a potential profit centre. Croatia has an expanding tourism industry that needs golf as an attraction in order to compete with the golf markets of Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey. The Croatian project we are designing is a 5 hour drive from Munich, one hour from Trieste airport in Italy and only a couple of clicks from the beach. It is an 18-hole resort development with housing. On the 27 hole project 30 km from downtown Budapest we have done the full housing master plan as well as the course and have put in 250 houses and a hotel aimed at the local market. There are very few "stand alone" 18 hole golf club projects in the pipeline that I am aware of. They are all linked in some way to housing or tourism.

GCNI: From whence do current developers in Eastern Europe get their 'blueprints' i.e. - do they tend to follow an American, British, Asian model?

JP: I don't really understand what is meant by American, British and Asian models. But if you are referring to all

those American designed Japanese funded and British managed European projects that have gone belly up in the last few decades due to massive ego attacks and overspending then I hope not. I personally don't follow anyone's model. The developers that I deal with are smart, educated and well travelled, they all seem to have done their homework pretty well. Together we define the golf product that we consider appropriate to the specific market and local conditions. We do the blue print stuff together. My input in these projects extends well beyond the design and construction of the golf course itself. I try to help my clients in whatever way I can to make their projects successful. I think that the opportunities for creative thinking are immense, so using faded second hand blue prints from outside continental Europe is really not a serious option. Common sense should lead one away from repeating other people's disasters, but there are a surprising number of lemmings on the golf scene. There are some very successful projects designed and built decades ago that owe their good fortune more to location and timing than concept and design. Persuading promoters not to copy those models has to be done with a degree of self assurance combined with a good data base and some effective market research.

land division and ownership problems plus a confused permitting process will have to be overhauled before there is significant progress. Slovenia is gradually increasing the number of golf holes there but the results are rather dismal due to a lack of professional input. The Black Sea is a distant future market, there are murmurings from Moldavia and chattering from Crimea. I have always dreamed of doing a project in Georgia, but the phone has remained silent on that one so far. Romania has a nascent tourism industry but has a very long way to go before golf becomes a viable investment. There will be a number of "glory" projects which will cost their developers dearly - a replay of the first Hungarian, Croatian and Czech expansion a few years ago.

Politicians and local government officials may one day come to realise that golf courses are nothing more or less than infrastructure for the leisure and tourism market, and like a hotel or airport they should be part of a development plan.

GCNI: Is there a skill shortage in these countries?

JP: There's a bigger skill shortage in the west of Europe where nobody seems to understand how to build golf courses anymore. There are plenty of expert bunker renovation technicians and tee remodelling consultants about. "Pass the buck and sub it out"

seems to be the motto of the few remaining golf course construction companies in France, Germany and UK who do 18 hole construction work. In Eastern Europe there are fewer experienced people but that can be an advantage. People listen, learn and end up doing what you want them to and not what they did last time for someone else.

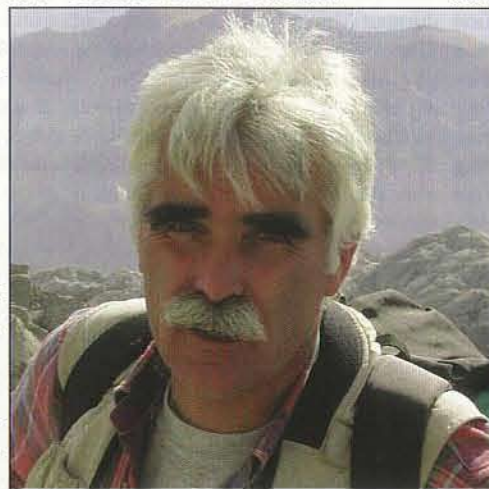
GCNI: What are the best ways of going about rectifying this problem?

JP: Share knowledge, teach, and help the locals to learn.

Impose external help sparingly and sensitively by using experienced designers, managers and builders who are self reliant, who are imaginative and creative.

Let the local companies learn properly by doing it for themselves with just enough guidance to avoid major cock ups. Teach the basics correctly, let them think for themselves.

There is no great mystery to creating golf courses if you know how. Unfortunately far too many people attempt to do so who have no idea. I call it chain saw surgery - spectacular but seldom effective.



GCNI: How much of a problem is it to be doing business outside of the EU?

JP: It isn't a problem for me.

GCNI: Countries such as Poland and Hungary are showing 68% and 28% increases in active golfers which sounds impressive until the actual numbers of new golfers - 280 and 4,000 respectively - are looked at. Is this, therefore a case of statistics creating a false impression or will new golf course continue to be built in such countries?

JP: Obviously both. This sort of data is not interesting or significant unless you have a background picture of what it actually represents. Going from three golf courses to five may be statistically impressive, but does not indicate some earth shattering change in society or national leisure patterns in a country of 10 million people. I would guess that Hungary will see one new 18 hole project per year opening for the next decade plus a smattering of small courses with small investments. Croatia has good potential for golf tourism. However

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