

On Site: a new course for Casablanca

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Architect Jeremy Pern gives an exclusive insight into the project at Casa Green Golf Club in Casablanca, Morocco.

In 2008 when I first visited the 400 hectare (1200 acre) site of the Casa Green Town project it consisted of a virtually treeless, featureless, undulating stony prairie with a few inches of meagre topsoil covering the underling 'tuff' – a very soft and crumbling limestone. Sparse grassy weeds and weedy grasses struggled to survive the onslaught of nibbling sheep and, for a brief period in April, a seemingly infinite number of small white snails.



Left: Pern describes the site as a 'blank canvas'. Right: Snails that lived on the site

A blank canvas can be an intimidating start to the day and as a site for a golf course, this was about as blank as it gets. The topography – a long slow and gentle wave about two kilometres long and 40 metres high – was the only item on the good side of the 'For and Against' list.

However it rapidly became clear to me that an unusual opportunity for a unique course layout had just presented itself. By locating the clubhouse where it sits today and configuring the course around lakes in crux of the wave at the base of the valley we would have an astounding view over 15 holes. The owner agreed to my suggestion to favour a 'core' type golf course, where the housing development surrounded the course rather than a 'ribbon' development where housing strips invade the integrity of the playing areas.



View from the Casa Green clubhouse

Once the outside boundaries of the course had been decided and the overall routing of the course approved I felt that we needed a very strong internal landscape feature to link up many parts of the course and to enable us to create features that would

render many of the holes memorable and challenging. From the very highest point on the site, in front of the fourth tees, right down to the lake in front of the ninth tees, we created a series of *oueds* (dry water courses), of different depths and widths, snaking through or beside holes four, three, two, sixteen, fifteen, fourteen, seventeen, and curling around the back of greens eight and eleven.



Casa Green's oueds help the course's drainage

In addition to the *oueds*, all of the holes have intrinsic golfing interest. The extensive shaping of 100 per cent of the playing surfaces, the deep and occasionally invisible bunkers, the water hazards – particularly in front of greens five and eight and along the left side of the twelve fairway – and the varied and extensive planting (designed in conjunction with Carey Duncan).

But I do have a special weakness for a couple of holes.

The ninth hole is a 230m par three over the lake just below the clubhouse and the driving range area. The hole has a very intimidating set up from the back tees, but a comfortable almost risk free hole from the very forward tees the green side of the lake. The green itself is a huge 700 square metre expanse of undulating turf, but about 30 per cent is hidden behind a grassy knoll on the right side.

The strong bunker shaping gives both a distorted perspective as to the length of the hole and the depth of the green, whilst drawing the player's eye away from the intimidating expanse of water in front of the left side of the green.

With the pin placed on the left side of the green the chances of a par are fairly reduced. The safe option for a higher handicap player is to aim right and play long and thus avoid the water, and with a chance of a favourable roll, you may not only reach the green, but stay on it. But be careful of the nose coming into the putting surface from the centre right of the green.

Having said all that, the hole is actually less intimidating than it looks, but it still represents a fine challenge for all golfers.



The seventeenth at Casa Green features three hidden bunkers

The seventeenth hole, a 520m long par five, whilst not particularly long and with a nice downhill roll the incautious optimist may be tempted to cut a corner on the right side of the fairway by flying the long bunker that seems to sit gently on a ridge line below the fairway behind. The other three bunkers nearby are hidden from view – traps is a fitting description of what they are about.



The club forms part of the Casa Green Town real estate development

With an afternoon headwind I'd suggest that only the most fearsome long hitters should go down this route, for the slightest error may ruin your card. There is plenty of room in front and to the left and you may still reach the green with a chance of birdie.

The cactus planting down the right side of the fairway and the one with its rocky floor and spring flowering plants is best steered clear of, so stay in the middle or on the left.

But of course if you are behind on your score and willing to take a chance to catch up on the last but one hole, here is the opportunity to go for the reward by overcoming the risk.

If you don't attack the green with your second shot the risks are minimal and no real punishment lies in the green approach.

But for those who attack the green from a long way off, be warned – the cost of a misfire and a subsequent reload may be considerably higher than you first reckoned. Perspectives and angles are tricky to accurately assess and the shadows and edges of the mounding exaggerate the dangers by drawing the eye away from the flag. The view is a busy one and concentration is needed.

The green is subtle and like all of them on the course, requires some careful thought. The lazy bumps and dips are sometimes difficult to read.



The Donut, described by Pern as "a putting green that's different"

Almost 20 years ago I designed a huge 'donut' putting green with a vast bunker as the hole in the middle, in such a way that one could have an 18-hole circular putting course, starting and finishing from the same point and putting from one flag to the next. Sadly that project never saw the light of day, but the idea kept popping up in my mind on every new project, but due to the constraints of space, budget and location I never managed to build my dream putting green until now.

Over the years the idea has refined itself and at last at Casa Green Golf Club I have managed to build what I'd like to think is the ultimate putting green.

Overlooking the whole of the golf course, situated close to the club house, just below the driving range, and between the first and tenth tees, a very long strip of putting surface winds its way right around a huge bunker in which sit five grassy islands, each one crowned with an olive tree. The putting green undulates gently in every plain, with 18 flag positions available for genuine putting competitions for all levels of golfers and even non-golfers.

Nothing exists in a vacuum and the team who all helped on the project deserves

mention: CGI the client, ICON the masterplanners, Gregori the contractor, Excel the engineers, Imaginieur the irrigation designers, Carey Duncan the planting designer, Oliver Pern the project supervisor, and Braemar the management and green keeping team.

I hope all those who play the course in the future have as much fun as I have designing and creating this course.



Jeremy Pern is a golf course architect based in Gratsens, France.



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