

A course of two halves

OMBRIA RESORT, PORTUGAL

Adam Lawrence visits the new Ombria resort, the first golf to be built on Portugal's Algarve for almost ten years

Spain and Portugal, Europe's two traditional top golf tourism destinations, have had a tough time of it in the ten years since the great recession. Though surprisingly few courses seem to have actually closed, the pace of development in both countries has slowed to a snail's pace.

The 'new Valderrama' course, first mooted well over a decade ago, has still not come to fruition, and in Portugal, the most recent opening, Cynthia Dye's West Cliffs north of Lisbon, finally made its bow last year after a fourteen-year gestation period. There has not been a new development on the

Algarve since the Amedoeira resort, fully ten years ago, and Portugal's highest profile recent golf project, David McLay Kidd's Comporta course, went into liquidation after the downfall of the Espiritu Santu banking family, its developers and for decades the country's richest clan.

So the arrival of another new golf property is something to be thankful for. If investors think a new proposition is worth it, that suggests the business must be pretty good for the guys out there at the moment. For the golfers too; who doesn't enjoy the whole process of trying a new venue.

Finnish property developer Ilpo Kokkila, founder and current chairman of SRV, one of the country's largest development firms, has owned the property that Ombria is being developed on for close to two decades, through his company Pontos.

About five miles north of the town of

Loulé, itself about a half hour's drive from the Algarvian capital, Faro, the site, formerly a fruit farm, is centred on a river valley, surrounded by hills. Pontos hired veteran Portuguese architect Jorge Santana da Silva to design the course, and the tender for the golf build was won by a well-known



A visualisation of the Ombria development

figure in the Portuguese golf industry, Benjamim Neves da Silva of ProGolf Construction (who also built West Cliffs and the Rio de Janeiro Olympic course for architect Gil Hanse).

The river valley is very good land for golf, but it is in no sense big enough to accommodate eighteen holes. The front nine occupies land on the other side of the hill. At first glance, it looks less interesting, but, from the fourth hole onwards the course is routed along the bottom of the wild hillside, which adds a lot of appeal.

The par three second hole features a very large and quite dramatically contoured green; though there are others with notable contour, this is by some distance the wildest. The contours divide the green into several different ‘pockets’. Getting caught out and leaving your tee shot in the wrong pocket will cause a lot of strife when the greens are running at full speed; on the other hand, especially in the front left pocket, the slopes create a gathering effect – a ‘hole in one’ pin location, if you like.

seventh (which plays from a series of increasingly high tees at the edge of the property and tumbles downhill) has several of them basically in the fairway, interfering with where the golfer wants to be on his second and third shots.

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The most remarkable, and I think memorable hole on the front side, is the very long par-five seventh. All around the property, routing the course around the old oak trees was a challenge; these trees are basically not permitted to be removed under any circumstances. Most of the way round, the team has done an excellent job. The

Now; trees interfering with a golf hole in this way? Normally I would say no, and it is a rather jarring look. On the other hand, the trees are several hundred years old, and do not grow more than about ten or fifteen metres high. It should not be impossible for golfers to plot a way around them, or over them if need be.

The ninth hole – a short par four, in principle driveable for many from the right tee – has the potential to be endlessly vexing. Because of the dogleg left, from the back two tees, the hole is basically blind, if one tees off with anything more than a six iron or so. With several bunkers around the green, and no real landing area for those going with the driver, to do so will be an extremely high risk shot. I like the hole, and I expect, on returning to play the course, to be sorely tempted to pull out the big dog, but I think that six iron is going to be the smart choice of shot in most circumstances.

Ombria’s front nine is good, with some quite memorable holes, but I think that for sure it is the back nine that will capture the imagination. The valley is quite narrow, and so the

architect has routed holes up and down it in a creative way to maximise the available width. The tenth and eleventh (one a five, one a four) are both long holes that cross the river on several occasions – demanding stout and reliable hitting – while the twelfth sees the golfer ascend the valley side to play a dogleg right tee shot back down into the valley. The fairway is protected by a large bunker on the right; certainly a very inviting tee shot, and a strong hole.

The thirteenth requires more ascent to reach the tee, and offers perhaps the best vistas of the entire course, across the hills and mountains that line the site. It struck me as fairly remarkable that there was room to build this par three hole on its high ridgeline, but Benjamim Silva explained to me that the earthworks had made it possible.

The final part of the three hole ‘loop’ is another par three, this time from a high tee on the valley side to a green set right by the river.

From here, the golfer turns down the valley and home. The seventeenth hole, a drive and a pitch to a green set on the opposite bank of the river, would have made the ideal closer; it is located directly under where the clubhouse terrace will be. But this is the price to be paid for a tight valley site of this kind; there simply was not room for another hole further up the valley.

One of the things I loved about Ombria was the way that the design and construction team has emphasised its Portuguese character. Regular readers will be only too well aware that I believe a course must reflect its location in landscape style, featuring,

and ideally golf design too, and Ombria does that well. The stone walls, for example, have been built to an outstanding level, and the restoration of the network of ‘levada’ aqueducts, previously used to irrigate the farm, but now used to fill the large irrigation lake, almost entirely by gravity, is a remarkable and wonderful thing.

Ombria is mostly growing in now, with opening planned for 2020, and I think it will be a success. It is something quite different to most of the Algarve’s courses, which are to be found on the coastal plain, and I can see a day up in the hills as being a very relaxing excursion. The resort and villa development, really only in earthwork stages at the moment, promises to be extremely dramatic, and with only a minor impact on the golf course. **GCA**