

FACT OR FICTION?

"I'D NEVER BUY ON A GOLF RESORT, AS THEY ARE HARMFUL TO THE ENVIRONMENT"

Some golf resorts have done little to convince critics they are anything better than water-guzzling eyesores, but is every new golf development cause for eco concern?

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When Andalusia introduced new laws last year to clamp down on golf developments in a region that is home to 118 courses – a third of Spain’s total – government spokesman Gaspar Zarrias summed it up like this: “We do not want to see 17,000 homes with a large garden with holes in it.”

Besides being a drain on water in one of Europe’s driest regions, high-density golf developments have become a blot on the landscape and, increasingly, in the downturn, unsellable. Now southern Spain’s laws dictate that no more than 10 houses per hectare (2.5 acres) can be built around a golf course and water must be recycled for irrigation.

At Desert Springs near Vera in Almeria, a place as arid as its name suggests, you would imagine a thirsty golf development would be as welcome as a chocolate parasol. Indeed, it took its British developers, the Almanzora Group, 13 years to get planning permission. But they have silenced eco critics by creating a resort that, rather than destroying the environment, has nurtured incredible biodiversity among the fairways and desert plains, beating 60 other Spanish golf courses to win the national Madera Verde award for environmental sensitivity.

Besides its flock of mainly British home-owners who lap up the luxurious villas and the resort’s relaxed club-like friendliness, Desert



Springs – previously a 300-acre tomato and lettuce field – is home to a third of the species of birds found in Andalusia, as well as 320 animal species and 4,000 types of cacti. This is largely down to the resort's resident Indiana Jones, naturalist Joel Lodé (though Lodé was cycling across the world's deserts in search of rare cacti long before Indie was a twinkle in Spielberg's eye).

"The desert is so full of life, but people don't realise," says Lodé. "In a hostile environment, we have allowed a delightful landscape to flourish and infinite species of mammals, birds, reptiles and insects. Now this corner of the Almanzora Valley is far more fertile than it was in the past, thanks in great measure to the golf resort."

Home-owners at Desert Springs are encouraged to plant low-maintenance cacti gardens and though the golf course is said by pro players to be among the best in Spain, the greens are punctuated by areas of desert scrub to avoid wasteful expanses of thirsty fairways and irrigated by natural wells beneath the resort and desalinated water from its own plant.

In Catalonia, whose left-wing government is strongly anti-golf, the only new golf resort in construction is PGA Catalonia near Girona, set around the prestigious Stadium Course that was home to this year's Spanish Open. A handful of huge but mainly single-storey villas are being built among the pine trees. "We have to recycle all water by law," says sales

manager Jaume Marin. "The government imposes punishingly high taxes on water consumption."

On the Costa de la Luz, a coast known for its spectacular wild beaches and unspoilt nature, new golf developments are keen to assert their eco credentials. At El Rompido near Huelva, the area's only 36-hole course is purely for playing, not living on, to protect the natural environment. Instead, the nearest new apartments at Marina El Rompido have views of the greens without any chance of balls ending up in the garden.

Meanwhile, on the Algarve side of the River Guadiana, Quinta do Vale, designed by Seve Ballesteros, claims to be a golf course that is beneficial to the environment. "We diligently replant any trees we have to uproot and then add plenty more. Of the 9,000 fig, olive, pine, almond and carob trees on display, 3,000 were new additions," says Seve's technical architect, Santiago Verastegui. "The aim when finished is to appear as if man has not touched the land."

In the Languedoc in southern France, set against a beautiful 17th-century chateau among vineyards, olive groves and woodland, the €500m (£431m) five-star golf and spa resort Domaine de Lavagnac is also taking care of its natural surroundings. "We were determined not only to restore the chateau to its former glory but to make sure that any work we did would enhance the natural environment rather than detract from it," says

Charles Cox, chairman of developers The Frere Group.

That has meant moving minimal earth and ensuring the new properties blend in with their surroundings by using natural materials, vegetation-covered roofs, locally quarried stone, European (rather than cheaper Asian) wood cladding and landscaping around each building.

The eco measures extend to the golf course, which will have drought-tolerant grass that requires minimal watering and a high-tech irrigation system that will not water if it's windy or raining.

"Golf courses may seem intrinsically un-eco-friendly, but a new generation of courses, such as Domaine de Lavagnac, are undertaking more sound ecological practices," says Gordon Miller, founder of eco-homes website www.whatgreenhome.com. "Flora and fauna are undisturbed where possible during course construction, the grasses on the greens and fairways are selected for their low-irrigation requirements, and

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rainwater is harvested for reuse on the course, with state-of-the-art irrigation systems ensuring wastage is minimal."

Miller also cites Bom Sucesso near Obidos in Portugal as a prime example of an eco-aware golf development, with less than seven per cent of the 360 acres built upon. The golf course is planted with a low-irrigation grass called festuca, and much of the remaining land has been left as wilderness and an eco reserve.

As for the properties – mainly single-storey villas that display the idiosyncratic imagination of the famous Portuguese architects behind them – they come with grass roofs and walls covered in climbing plants and shrubbery, to provide natural insulation and camouflage. Impeccably eco, it certainly is. But finding your way home again after a boozy night out? Now that could be tricky. ☀