

# GOLFER'S PARADISE

THE HUGE GROWTH IN THE POPULARITY OF GOLF BASED REAL ESTATE IN THE UAE PRESENTS UNIQUE CHALLENGES TO COURSE DESIGNERS. HOLLY SANDS MEETS GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT PETER HARRADINE TO FIND OUT HOW IT'S DONE.



1. JEBEL ALI HOTEL &amp; RESORTS GOLF COURSE, DUBAI, UAE

**THE UAE IS HOME TO SOME OF THE MOST GOLF COURSE FRIENDLY CONDITIONS AROUND, DESPITE THE FACT THE GOLF COURSES THERE ARE BUILT ON SAND**

Ask any golf enthusiast what their dream job would be and it's guaranteed that being a course architect will be pretty high up the list. Though as Peter Harradine, golf course architect for his family firm Harradine Golf could tell you, it's not all fun and games.

With a career in course design that started when he was still at school and projects around the world, Harradine has faced the challenge of adapting to some of the world's most diverse climatic conditions – from the Losone championship course in his home country of Switzerland, to Jebel Ali in the desert of Dubai, where he has spent the last 31 years of his life.

Surprisingly, though, according to Peter Harradine, the UAE is home to some of the most golf course friendly conditions around, despite the fact the golf courses there are built on sand.

In fact, he says, the UAE's environmental conditions make it easier to design and maintain golf courses there than in parts of Europe.

"People think that it's much more difficult to grow grass on sand than it is on clay. But given the constant warm season, it's extremely easy to grow and quite easy to maintain. Mainly because you know the climate is going to be more or less the same all year round".

"You control everything here, there are no variables. In Europe it rains one day, snows the next, then it rains for a week and is sunny all through the next. It is easier to work here, because the irrigation is automatically controlled".

He goes on to say that there are other upsides to designing a golf course in the desert due to the malleable terrain, allowing designers more freedom of creativity: "In terms of the structure, shifting sand is a lot easier than shifting rock. Most of the courses are sculpted out of sand, which is easier to shape apart from when it's very thin."

Naturally however, Harradine says that creating a golf course to withstand scorching summer temperatures places restrictions on the aesthetic aspects of a course: "We're limited with the species of trees that we can use, because there are some that you will never be able to grow in

the region. That's why we can't use a lot of flowering shrubs here."

Even plants that can withstand the heat aren't guaranteed survival on the course, "The winds come up from the sea carrying a lot of salt and many of the plants scorch. Other times, the roots don't go down deep enough and stay very near the surface, so it doesn't take much wind to do away with the plant."

It's not just responding to the natural habitat and climate that poses a challenge to course architects, the next obstacle appears in the form of "Golf communities", according to Harradine.

Many of the golf courses being developed in Dubai as well as the rest of the world form part of real estate developments – a concept that Harradine believes does not necessarily guarantee great golf courses.

"Golf courses sell houses," says Harradine. "But unfortunately a lot of developers don't care about the golf itself."

Clearly any golf course architect wants enough free space to will allow them to design a course to the best of their ability, but, says Harradine, architects are increasingly losing land to real estate developers constructing the properties that surround the course.

This isn't the only oversight concerning Harradine though, "Golf has become a very dangerous game, because with new equipment the ball travels incredible lengths and they have very little control over it. So the problem is, where does the ball go? It goes into people's gardens and through their windows. If you're a player on the course you pretty much expect to be hit on the head by a stray ball, but if you're having a cup of coffee in your garden, you don't really expect a ball to land in your cup."

The solution would be to grant the course designers extra space in order to minimise the risk of residents being bombarded with stray golf balls, but for some it's too late he says, "A lot of real estate projects in the States have had to put big nets up because they were built in the old days. People didn't have the same equipment then, so they didn't hit the ball so far. Now these properties have become dangerous, they've put these incredibly huge nets up and it resembles a chicken farm which we don't



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2. ABU DHABI GOLF RESORT DESIGNED BY HARRADINE

3. BOULDER HILLS GOLF COURSE, HYDERABAD, INDIA

4. GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT PETER HARRADINE

5. JEBEL ALI HOTEL &amp; RESORTS GOLF COURSE, DUBAI, UAE



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want to happen here."

However, the chance of straying golf balls doesn't seem to put many buyers off buying properties in golf communities. And, says Harradine, the buyers may not be who you'd expect. "Around 70% of the people who buy houses on golf courses are not golfers," he says. "I think they like the idea of an extended garden. They want something beautiful and green outside their house, especially here where there isn't all that much natural greenery."

"There's also a guarantee that no-one is going to come along and build something in front of your house, so you'll always have a great view."

Despite the strong interest from buyers, Peter Harradine believes that golf is yet to make its full potential impact on the UAE's real estate boom.

He says: "If you look at the whole real estate industry then look at the area of golf courses, it's still a very small percentage. It's just that golf is a high-profile game and a high-profile marketing tool."

While there are currently only a few golf courses within the UAE, many new and prospective real estate developments have golf courses embedded in their infrastructure, spurred on by an increasing demand.

Homes situated on golf courses come close in terms of the demand they generate to



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beachfront properties and as available land on the UAE coast gradually diminishes, many buyers are snapping up homes off-plan for new golf communities.

In addition to the popularity of real estate golf developments, there is also a surging demand for golf resorts. New hotel projects are keen to lure the golf tourists into the UAE, implementing courses into the general infrastructure and many employing top golfing names to be involved in the course design.

The UAE is currently seeing sky-high revenues in the industry as Dubai steps up its bid to become a tourism hub for

travellers. Green fees in the Emirate for instance are higher on average than those in traditional golfing regions such as the UK, Ireland and Australia.

Harradine says that he doesn't foresee a decline in the popularity of golf resorts expecting this to continue for the foreseeable future, particularly due to the great appeal of the UAE as a tourist destination.

"This place is clean, it's organised. Tourists want peace and quiet and that's exactly what they get in the UAE."

Currently it's residents though who account for the larger part of the golf



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industry's profits in the Middle East. Revenues for 18 hole-courses in the Middle East average at around US\$7.83m, with courses in Dubai accounting for more than 50% of the region's facilities. Revenues in the emirate alone currently average at US\$10.33m. The question is, will revenues continue to rise for the golfing industry in the Middle East?

Harradine believes that golf could continue its money-spinning pattern for as long as the real estate industry supports it. "Golf courses on their own don't make a lot of money. Unless you're in a very good location, like in a town or in a very chic area where you can charge a lot on membership fees and visiting fees."

He believes that stand-alone courses in Dubai would find it hard to sustain a profit due to the phenomenal cost of course maintenance in the emirate.

"Stand-alone courses don't really make



**"IT'S NOT JUST GOLF THOUGH, IT'S CLOTHES, HOTELS, AND EVERYONE GOES ON ABOUT THIS BRAND IDENTITY THAT IS ASSOCIATED WITH GOLF PLAYERS NOW"**

6. MIRAGE CITY GOLF COURSE, CAIRO, EGYPT

7. ABU DHABI GOLF RESORT IS HOME TO THE EPGA TOURNAMENT

8. BOULDER HILLS GOLF COURSE, HYDERABAD, INDIA



money, but they were never meant to make money. In the old days, golf courses were there for people to play golf and the cost of playing was just enough to cover maintenance and building costs," he says. "Unfortunately the maintenance costs in the UAE are huge, because the course needs millions of litres of water in a week. They have to cover their running costs before they can make a profit, but obviously they make one in the end."

Though he explains that despite their low profitability levels, they retain their popularity in traditional golfing locations.

"In Europe, if you take Spain and Portugal out of the equation, the amount of real estate developments is around 2%. The majority are stand-alone courses built for people to play golf, not to make huge amounts of money."

"It's just lately that we've started following this American idea or example,

where people realised that they could sell a lot more villas for a lot more money if they built a golf course. So the course is built to sell villas, not for the golf," and Harradine makes no attempts to hide his concern regarding the increasing commercialisation of the game around the world.

"It's not just golf though, it's clothes, hotels, and everyone goes on about this brand identity that is associated with golf players now.

He admits however that he too is joining the branding revolution: "Now I'm branding my name, because I have to do it to be part of the game," says Harradine.

It's clear that a real love of the game has been the driving force behind Peter Harradine's career. He says: "For me, golf is the greatest game in the world, it's a very social game - three generations can play together.

"The guy with the highest handicap, or lets say the ten-year-old child, can have a really easy time beating the grandfather who might be a scratch player."

By playing a round with someone, Harradine believes you can find out a great deal about their nature, in a way that few other sports offer. "Golf is unique. It's a very mental game and you need a lot of talent. Although, you need to remember to enjoy it, the problem now is that people take golf too seriously and you can tell a lot about a guy by the way he controls himself during a game. If he cheats in golf, he'll most probably cheat in life."

Though still a member of the Emirates Golf Club, he is no longer able to play following a number of operations some years ago.

Still, having played golf since the tender age of six to a handicap of five, he's the first to admit he's had a good run.

He says: "I don't really miss it that much, because I'm always on golf courses.

It's only when you're on a golf course and you see other people playing that you wish you could play as well."

Peter Harradine's passion for the game is nothing short of infectious, and his boundless enthusiasm places heavy emphasis on the fact that for him, golf is not just a game, it's a lifestyle. 