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Golf grips

At the official opening of Golf Club Pravets, talk of whether Bulgaria can become an international golf tourism destination

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Say the word "golf" in Bulgaria, and associations are likely to be that it is a pastime for the wealthy few – and that locally, the brief spurt of laying out courses was simply a side-effect of the brief bubble of the property market.

For all that, Bulgaria now has eight golf courses, having just added one with the official opening of May 14 of the Golf Club Pravets – which, in turn, will host the first fully professional golf tournament in Bulgaria, the PGA European championship for club professionals from September 27

to 30.

Interviewed at the opening of the club, PGAs of Europe chief executive Ian Randell said that he was "refreshed" by the local ambition to develop the domestic as well as the international market.

"We have seen in too many countries that if you purely want to attract the international market and don't grow the game at home, then it's a short-term success," Randell said.

However, he said, the challenge that Bulgaria faced internationally in becoming a golf tourism destination was in not having enough facilities "but somebody has to get moving as they have here and as they have at the Black Sea".

Bulgaria had some challenges with climate, meaning that it could not be a winter destination for golf in the same way as Turkey, Spain and Portugal.

"But I can see absolutely the opportunity for golf holidays down on the Black

Sea. And here you are looking a lot more, internationally, for long weekend breaks rather than a week golfing. Particularly while it is just one resort, the opportunity to come and visit Bulgaria, have a couple of days golfing in a resort that has facilities for golfers and non-golfers."

Randell said that having a PGA Europe professional championship event would help by bringing international media coverage.

Further, bringing out professionals should mean amateurs will follow.

"If they (professionals) can come, experience the warmth and the hospitality, and then these guys bring coaching trips, they bring amateur golfers."

The first stage, he said, was making people aware that there is a golfing culture in Bulgaria.

Golf for all

Keith Haslam, managing director of Braemar Golf,

BULGARIAN GOLF COURSES

- Air Sofia Golf Club, Ihtiman
- BlackSeaRama Golf & Villas, Balchik
- Golf Club Ibar, Dolna Banya
- Light House Golf Resort, Balchik
- Sliven Golf Course
- St. Sofia Golf Club & Spa, Ravno Pole village, near Sofia
- Thracian Cliffs Golf Resort & Spa, Kavarna
- Pravets Golf & Spa
- Pirin golf and country club



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the management company for the Pravets club, said in an interview that "in some ways it's the approach that we are trying to achieve that is maybe different rather than the facilities".

Peter Harradine, designer of the Pravets course, "designs golf courses, I think, for the masses to play golf," Haslam said.

There has been a trend, according to Haslam, of golf courses getting more difficult and taking people longer to get round, "to the point where it was getting a little bit not enjoyable".

"What Peter is very good at and what has been achieved here is (...) it isn't the longest golf course in the world but it's still a very challenging and enjoyable one from the longest tees. This, I think, is going to be a resort golf course. And it doesn't apologise for that."

The owners, Haslam said, "supported us when we were saying, 'this is golf for all. Come even if you've never played golf at all. Come, we have our own clinics for beginners'."

Haslam describes memberships as "reasonably priced", less than two "five-star signature projects" of the three golf courses on Bulgaria's Black Sea.

Separately, Haslam tells a news conference at the opening: "It is fantastic to come to new emerging markets for golf such as Bulgaria".

Money matters

Lachezar Todorov, managing director of Terra Tour Service, the investor in the project – the golf course and the entire complex of facilities – said that the full amount of the investment would be "most probably" more than 60 million euro, with the golf course alone exceeding 15 million euro out of this total.

The complex as a whole is to cover a million sq m, and Todorov said that it would have less real estate than on some other golf courses.

Thirty-five plots would be sold for private villas, most one-storey and some two-storey, Todorov said.

He said that the project had benefitted the local economy because about half of the employees were from Pravets or nearby Botevgrad and Etopole. He estimated that the project, through local taxes, contributed something up to 60 per cent of the municipal budget of Pravets.

In all, the complex has the 18-hole course, a four-star RIU chain hotel, conference centre, 3000 sq m spa centre, outdoor Olympic-size swimming pool, tennis courts, restaurants, casinos and two night bars.

Asked about visitors that they are aiming to attract, Haslam said that the start would be the Bulgarian domestic market as well as the existing tourism market coming into Bulgaria.

Further, the company envisaged the regional markets, such as Romania and with Braemar Golf having a large project under construction in Moscow, "we see the Russian market as an opportunity because of the Russians travelling here. But we would also definitely like to see some of the big travellers in Europe, the northern Europeans, the Scandinavians, the Germans, the Austrians, the British, the French and so on".

For such customers, Haslam said, the most appropriate package would be one that would allow them to spend two days at the Pravets course and then go on to Thracian Cliffs.

"It is important because the international traveller likes to play more than one golf course. That is where we have to work with our golf friends here in Bulgaria and put packages together."

Randell, asked how interest could develop with Pravets set to host the European club professional championship for three years, said that tournaments took two or three years to develop.

"I have a lot of experience with tournaments...The first year is hard. You have to do all the work in year one to grow the interest, build the infrastructure, build the awareness. Certainly it is at least a three-year project and let's hope it continues beyond that."

Returning to the theme of golf having become less affordable and more complicated than it should be, Randell said that successful golfing cultures require, first of all, the right facilities.

"You have to have facilities that make the game enjoyable to all levels of golfer. Too often we see too many championship golf courses which are too hard for the beginners."

"I like the comparison with skiing, we can't just build black runs, we need nursery slopes as well."

He hoped that perceptions about golf, especially in this part of the world, as an "elite sport" could be changed.

"Hopefully golf becoming an Olympic sport again in 2016 may help us change some of those perceptions as well, because people, quite often, form perceptions without too much knowledge." **e**