

Lands of challenge

Golf development in Africa and the Middle East is dominated by residential and resort courses fueled by tourism, which continues to grow. **BY MIKE STETZ**

Golf course developments face challenges even in the most accommodating and benign of settings. It's just the nature of the beast, of carving out 18 holes on virgin land.

Then there's Africa and the Middle East.

There, in places, you may find obstacles beyond the norm — such as building a golf course in a desert or through a mangrove forest.

Golf development in Africa and much of the Middle East can be a risky proposi-

tion. Golf Inc., in a special report, rates 50 of the region's 63 countries as "Investment discouraged" or "Investment strongly discouraged." (*Visit www.GolfIncMagazine.com for the free report*).

Only five countries, all in the Middle East, are rated as "Investment encouraged" or "Investment highly recommended." They include the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Those countries have a middle class that can support golf, even without tourism.

But tourism is the driving force for development in most of the region.

Most every major golf development has a resort or residential component to make it workable. That's certainly the case in the Middle East, according to Simon Mees, general manager of the Al Hamra Golf Club in Ras Al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates.

"Nearly all of the golf projects I can think of that have been put to development over the last 10 years come with a residen-

tial aspect or are actually part of real estate development master plans, which includes golf as a leisure facility of the development to sell properties,” he said.

The trend is big in Africa as well. According to a recent R&A report called “Golf Around the World,” of the 65 courses under development on the continent, 41 are resort-related.

And that’s likely because the golf tourism market is growing again. According to a recent report done by KPMG called “Golf Resorts in the European Mediterranean Region,” global golf holiday sales grew by more than 20 percent from 2011 to 2013.

Residential components are increasing, thanks to the “holiday home boom,” the report said. “Although resorts [including] residential real estate only represent a small proportion of the overall number of resorts, real estate-based resort developments have been more typical than any other in the past 5 years.”

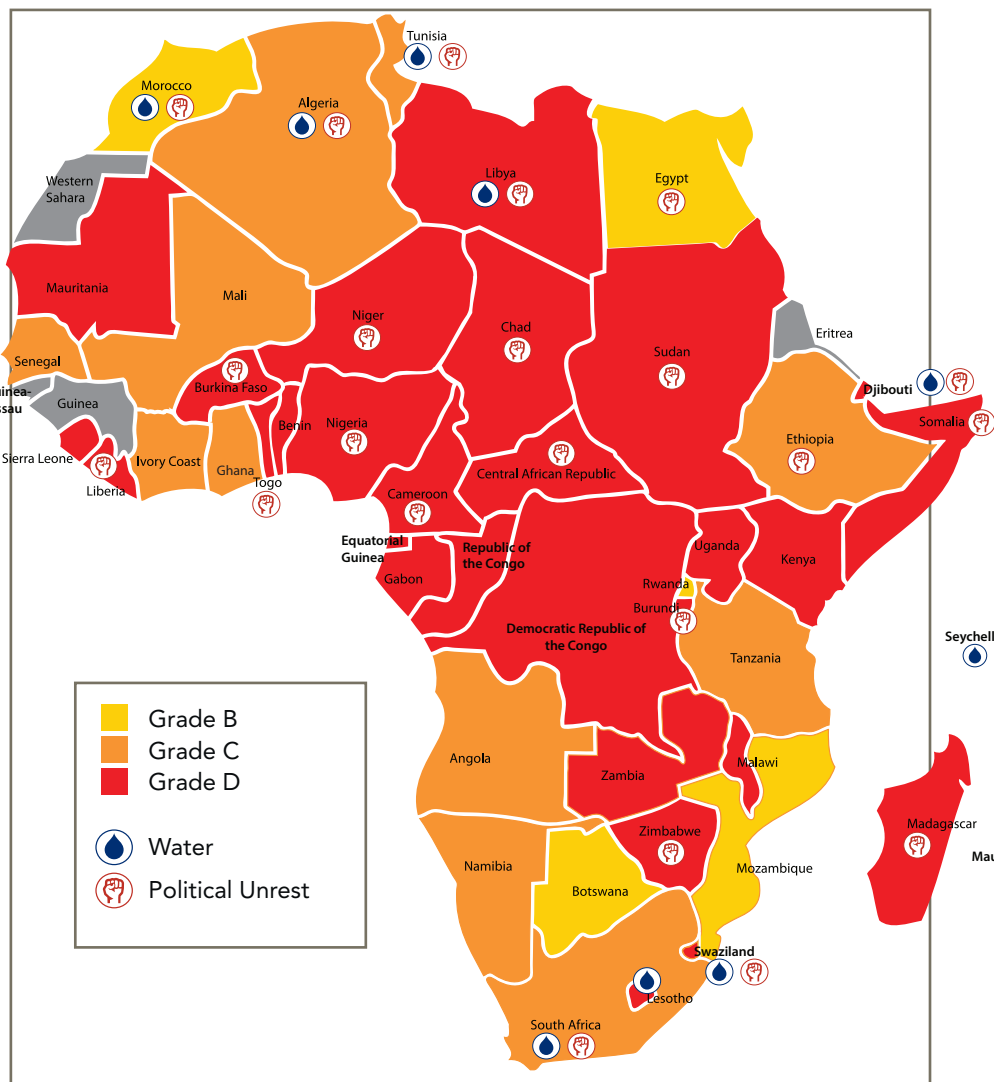
The Africa and Middle East regions are blessed with great canvases for this type of development. The settings can be beyond stunning and have drawn some of the world’s top architects and developers.

Jack Nicklaus has designed courses in South Africa, Egypt and Morocco. Gary Player has produced courses in South Africa and Morocco. Ernie Els has put his stamp on courses in South Africa and Dubai. (See accompanying Q&A with Els on page 42)

Is bigger better?

Mees said the trend in the Middle East is to “build everything bigger and better than the last.” However, he’s not certain if that’s a model for success, given how the game is growing.

Go back to 1988. That’s when the first grass course was built in the United Arab Emirates. Today it has more than 20. That first one, the Majlis Course at the Emirates Golf Club, features the renowned Omega Dubai Desert Classic, which attracts the



world’s top golfers.

The building spree has helped grow the game’s popularity. Indeed, the most recent Desert Classic, drew nearly 40,000 spectators.

The big golf developments, such as Jumeirah Golf Estates and Trump International Dubai, help bring all-important exposure, Mees said. However, with newcomers being introduced to the game daily, there’s a need for “more mainstream playable” courses to come online, he said.

His course was built in 2007 and last year was voted the best club for less than AED 400 (about \$108 in U.S. dollars). It recorded 15,000 visitor rounds — 22 percent of the nation’s total.

Peter Harradine, who has designed or co-designed more than 160 courses in the Middle East, Africa and Europe, designed Al Hamra. The popularity of the course is due to its large fairways and limited haz-

ards, **Harradine** said.

“It is quite an easy course to play, although quite difficult to score well,” he said.

Courses with large grassed surfaces, without a lot of rough — sandy or desert areas in this part of the world — and without many hazards are the most popular, he added.

Courses combined with residential projects can be disconcerting to golfers, he noted. A good number are designed with the real estate much too close to the fairway, so an errant shot can be trouble, he said. However, many need that component to be financially feasible.

Harradine also said the region needs more golf-friendly nine-hole courses.

“There are not many average golfers who enjoy monster championship courses, and they will play on them because the media hype makes them feel that they are missing out if they do not play them,” he said.