

**Pictured:** The 7th hole at Abu Dhabi Golf Club.



**Pictured:** Ed Edwards, Group General Manager at Abu Dhabi Golf Club and Saadiyat Beach Golf Club.



# Happy being back in day to day action

ED EDWARDS has been an integral part of the golf industry around the Middle East for more years than he cares to remember but after spending the last four years as General Manager of the ground-breaking José María Olazábal golf project in Qatar he is back in the UAE with Troon Golf as Group General Manager of Abu Dhabi Golf Club and Saadiyat Beach Golf Club. Worldwide Golf's Mike Gallemore talks to Ed Edwards about his future and how he sees the golf business progressing in the region.

## Feature: Ed Edwards at the helm in Abu Dhabi



**Pictured:** The 16th hole at Saadiyat Beach Golf Club.

*Worldwide Golf: Why did you choose to return to the UAE after spending so much time in developing the revolutionary Qatar International Golf Club?*

**ED EDWARDS:** I absolutely loved the experience in Qatar, taking a concept on a piece of paper and developing it into a facility that will attract worldwide acclaim not only for the quality of the end product but also the unique vision the golf club has, which revolves around growing the game of golf. However, when the opportunity came along to become part of the teams at Abu Dhabi Golf Club and Saadiyat Beach Golf Club, I jumped at the chance. It's not often that you have the opportunity to join an organisation like Troon Golf and be able to build on the success of two such incredible facilities.

*WWG: Are you pleased to be back working with Troon Golf after a four year break?*

**ED EDWARDS:** Definitely. Troon Golf is the market leader in

Golf Club Management and I look forward to be once again working with some of the leaders in the golf industry as well as utilising the countless resources the company has to assist with continually improving the quality of the golf offering and the overall customer experience. Troon Golf had a great influence on the success of The Address Montgomerie Dubai when I was General Manager there and I greatly look forward to re-establishing this relationship to the benefit of members and guests at the two facilities in Abu Dhabi.

*WWG: One of your outstanding achievements was to take golf into the schools in Qatar and introduce the game to more than 10,000 schoolchildren. Is golf on the curriculum something you'd like to see happening in the emirates with schoolteachers being able to also coach golf?*

**ED EDWARDS:** It's already happening in the UAE. Many of the UAE golf clubs have long-standing and successful ▶

**Above:** Saadiyat Beach Golf Club provides a breathtaking variety of golf experiences with every hole having its own unique character.

The course has been designed by Gary Player with sensitivity to the surrounding natural environment and in compliance with strict environmental guidelines.



junior programmes in place and the Arabic Schools Golf Initiative, recently launched by the Emirates Golf Federation and supported by the European Tour, has introduced golf into Arabic schools with the target of creating 3,000 new golfers. The Fatima Bint Mubarak Ladies Open recently hosted at Saadiyat Beach Golf Club was also a great opportunity to enthuse a new generation of golfers. Both Abu Dhabi Golf Club and Saadiyat Beach Golf Club have incredible teams of golf professionals delivering junior programmes (including Troon Family Golf and Troon Junior Club) on a daily basis and I look forward to being able to support all initiatives, events and professional teams at the clubs, as well as working with the Abu Dhabi Sports Council and other governmental authorities to explore various means of putting Abu Dhabi at the forefront of growing the game in the region.

**WWG:** *One of the principles of the Olazàbal project is to shorten the length of time it takes to play golf. Is this concept something you would like to introduce at Abu Dhabi and Saadiyat?*

**ED EDWARDS:** In Qatar the facility design is unique because it incorporates a Par 3 course, 6-hole championship course and an 18-hole championship course, which gives options to all golfers regardless of ability and time constraints. In Abu Dhabi we have established facilities with an existing clientele that has certain expectations that we have to meet and hopefully surpass. However, any initiatives to speed up a round of golf will be welcomed by the majority

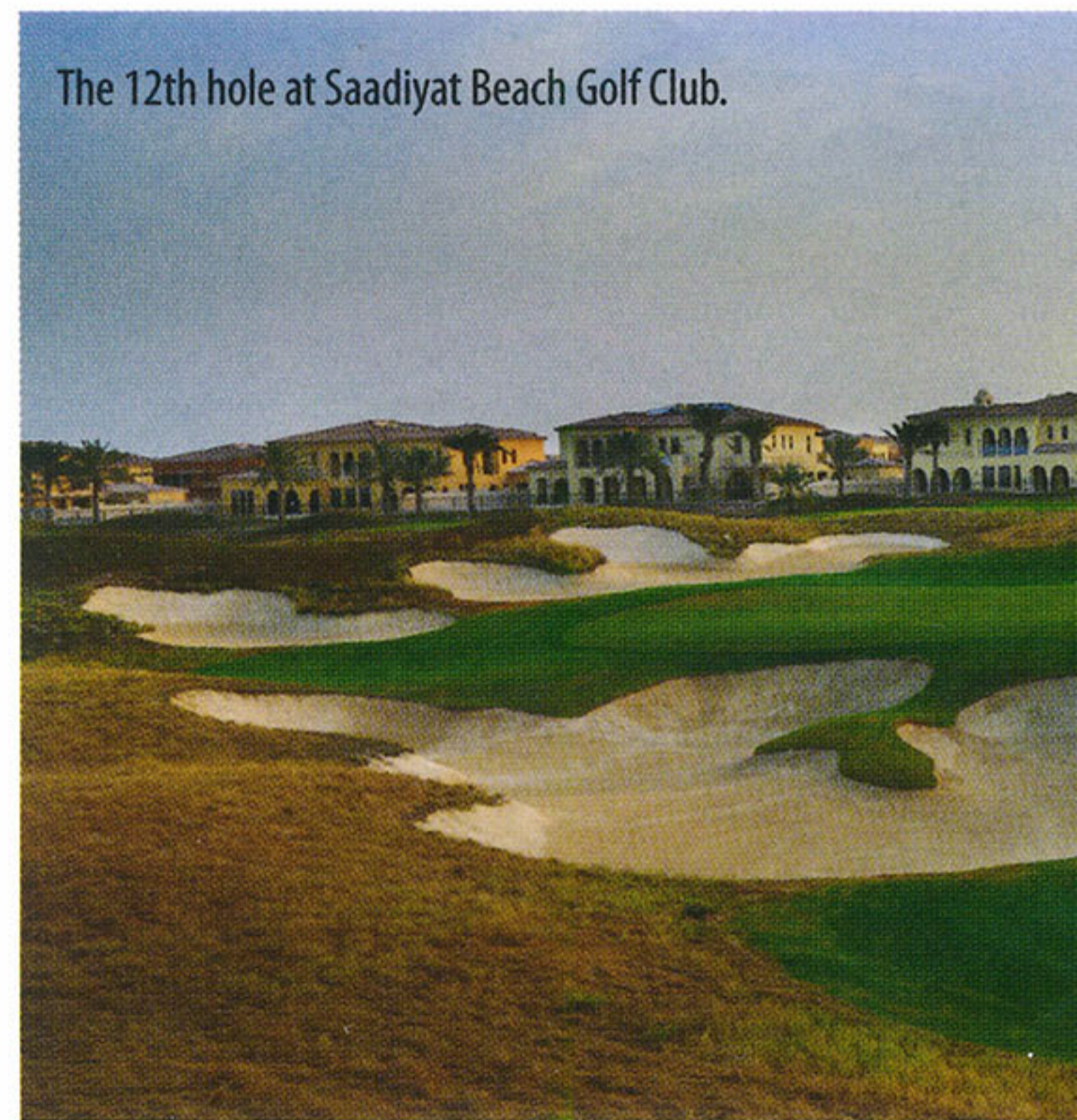
of golfers. Pace of play continues to be one of the top complaints and quicker rounds are an industry trend which Troon Golf has been actively addressing through their 'Troon Values Your Time' initiative.

**WWG:** *With golf losing its popularity in so many places what challenges do you see for the future of the industry worldwide and in particular in the UAE?*

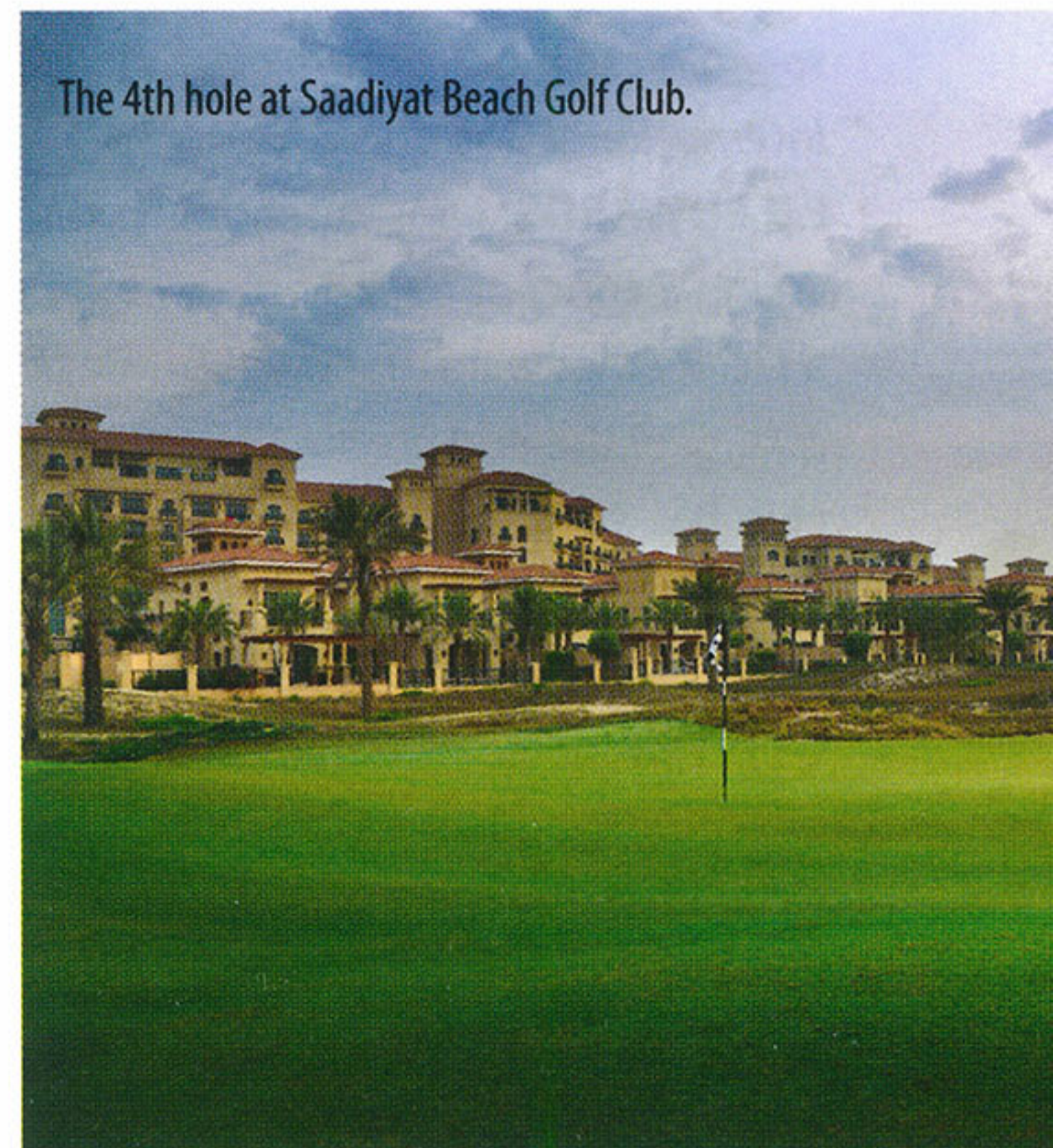
**ED EDWARDS:** There is a really positive movement in the golf industry at the moment. New role models are now firmly established with Rory McIlroy, Jordan Spieth, Justin Rose, Jason Day and many others and Tiger Woods' recent comeback can only be beneficial to the awareness and interest of the game. The recent changes in leadership within golf's various governing bodies has also created new concepts and ideas to try and keep golf relevant and growing.

As operators of a golf club, our job is very much geared towards creating an environment that people enjoy visiting. To provide our members with the high service standards they expect, a golf course that is in great condition, creative events that encourage participation, a food and beverage offering that provides both the quality and ambience plus many other benefits are all things within our control and require constant attention and development to keep our clubs attractive. As a golf destination, it is difficult to think of a place you can visit anywhere in the world that offers an equivalent experience from the variety of clubs to the amazing hotels and attractions available. We realise that the offering will be at the higher end of the

The 12th hole at Saadiyat Beach Golf Club.



The 4th hole at Saadiyat Beach Golf Club.



scale when compared to other destinations, however, we must ensure that what we provide surpasses expectation and still represents good value.

**WWG:** Are you looking forward to working in the emirates again in a 'hands on' role on two popular and busy golf courses instead of putting all your efforts into a long-term planning project like Qatar?

**ED EDWARDS:** When I left the UAE in 2012 I was General Manager of the leisure division of Emaar Hospitality Group, comprising The Address Montgomerie Dubai, Arabian Ranches Golf Club, Dubai Marina Yacht Club, Dubai Polo and Equestrian Club and the HAYYA Leisure and Fitness Clubs. With the nature and scope of these different businesses, along with the 880 associates that formed the division, it is safe to say that the role was extremely 'hands on' and you had to be available pretty much 24/7. But that's the hospitality industry in general! I'm pleased to be back in the UAE and getting stuck back into the day-to-day operations at both clubs.

**WWG:** Do you envisage your new position will have its challenges in dividing your time between the two courses or do you see economies of scale, including your duties, becoming a big advantage?

**ED EDWARDS:** I envisage both scenarios. There will undoubtedly be some challenges in trying to support both properties equally, however, there are already some great leaders and associates at both clubs who strive to surpass member and visitor expectations on a daily basis. One of my early priorities is to see how we can capitalise on any economies of scale and use my past experience to structure the businesses for long term success.

**WWG:** Although the emirates have a number of outstanding golf clubs is there still much to be done to attract more international golf tourists to the region?

**ED EDWARDS:** The golf offering in the UAE is amongst the best in the world. However, golf tourism, as with tourism in general, has faced some challenges over the past few years, initially fuelled by the global economic crisis and, more recently due to the strong dollar, making the destination more expensive to several of our main golf tourism markets. I intend to work closely with the tourism authorities, hoteliers, local attractions and other golf clubs in Abu Dhabi to ensure we continue to promote Abu Dhabi as a golf destination for the widest possible demographic and ultimately encourage tourism growth.

**WWG:** What is your priority for the first few months in the job?

**ED EDWARDS:** Initially, to get a proper understanding of both businesses by meeting and listening to as many members, associates, sponsors, visitors and supporters as possible, then using my experience working at some great golf resorts worldwide to continue the growth and development of both clubs.



## Showcase

**WWG:** Do you think the Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship should alternate with Saadiyat Beach Golf Club and Yas Links?

**ED EDWARDS:** The Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship has grown to become one of the premier events on the European Tour thanks to the long term support of HSBC, the Abu Dhabi Sports Council and the many sponsors, organisers and volunteers who have worked so hard over the past 12 years, not only to showcase Abu Dhabi Golf Club, but also Abu Dhabi as a destination. Though both Saadiyat and Yas Links are fantastic courses, the Abu Dhabi Golf Club, designed by the renowned golf course architect Peter Harradine, has always been the home of the Championship and all of the history that goes with it. It is a perfectly suited venue with The Westin Abu Dhabi Golf Resort & Spa in close proximity and the large event space immediately adjacent to the practice area.

