



Golf in the Czech Republic

By **TREVOR LEDGER**

If we were to believe all the hype and press releases, we would assume that golf in Eastern Europe is a relatively new phenomenon. Given that the Czech Republic is – politically at least – a new country, the idea of a golfing history could be considered anathema. Not so – golf in the region is at least 100 years old with the golf course at Karlov Vary being established in 1904 with the nine-holer at Marainske Lazn following a year later.

As was the case worldwide back then, golf was an importation for British ex-pats but it was not long before locals took the plunge and the Ringhoffer family started building a golf course on their extensive estate – the Ringhoffer Voleovice Golf Club.

Come 1926 and the first official members club at Prague was opened and a rosy – if low-key – future seemed assured. Nazi Germany, world war two and communist Russia reared their collective ugly heads and a 60 year hiatus ensued – but now golf is thriving in the Czech Republic.

What lessons have been learned from the more active (if no more mature) markets across Europe? Architect Jonathan Gaunt, fresh from the opening of the Kaskada Golf Resort in Brno is happy with how the market is shaping up: “Based on my experience over the past three or four years, I don’t see it ‘booming’, but enlarging steadily. The Czechs are careful and sensible and they plan strategically these kind of projects. What they seem to do is spend only on essential items – no major embellishments, nothing too vulgar. Whether they will go for ‘signatures’ remains to be seen – they have said to me that they’re not that interested because the golfing public won’t recognise them!”

The entire region is a curious and confusing picture Western Europeans; while Churchill described life behind the iron curtain as a ‘riddle wrapped in an enigma’, the emerging nations are only now becoming less opaque – to outsiders at least. Miroslav Holub, General Secretary of the Czech Golf Federation pointed out that for the citizens of the Czech Republic, life has, more or less, continued as normal through adversity: “First of all I have to say that the Czech Republic has quite a rich and long tradition of golf (longer than 100 years). However, the communist regime did not like golf as a sport but, fortunately, a few

people (former president Hanus Goldscheider or Lady Abrahams) made sure that golf ‘survived’ and lasted through bad times – the communist regime.

“So, to be honest with you, we have to admit that we had a good start and a good base for further golf development in the 90s. Therefore, you cannot compare us with other post-communist countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, Poland etc.”

And Gaunt agrees: “A similar market could be Poland in 10 or 15 years. But at present, Scandinavia is closest – a sensible growth with a reasonable standard of development.” All of which is good news to the golf industry – the explosion of ‘flat farm golf courses’ in the UK during the 1980s and early 1990s (thanks to irresponsible management of the industry by nameless bureaucrats...) came close to wrecking public perception of the game and managed to ruin quite a lot of constructors and developers to boot.

Holub is savvy enough to be aware of the dangers presented by an overheating golfing economy: “The growth [of the golf industry] has been dramatic since the revolution in 1989. One might say it has been too fast but I think that it has been at an appropriate and acceptable pace. Fast growth brings also many negative things; I don’t think it [the growth of golf in the Czech Republic] can be any faster. Quicker would mean less control and more problems. Therefore we are happy with this pace.”

In addition to the recent opening of Kaskada, Jonny Gaunt is ready to start work on Sekyra Golf Resort in Praha (Prague) that includes a 27-hole championship standard course and range. So does he see more of these full-blown developments on the horizon? Maybe, but smaller options seem likely too: “I think that there will be many 9-hole courses extending to 18 or 27 over the next 10-15 years – they have loads of 9-holers to work with!”

And herein lies the key to the Czech Republic – accessibility and affordability. Gaunt’s comparison with Scandinavia is accurate; in Sweden there is a legal requirement that all new courses offer a percentage of junior golfers the chance to play the game and a visit to a Norwegian golf club will show countless families across the putting green. Holub paints a similar picture of future golf in the Czech Republic: “We

want to make sure that more people look at golf as an available, family sport and make it even more popular. We have about 35,000 registered players and we would like to increase this number to 50,000 in the next three to five years.

“It seems to me that we have enough golf courses but could have even more players for the amount of golf courses we have (the market is not saturated yet). I feel that the supply and demand law will do its job here...”

The harsh laws of capitalism coming to bear on the former communist country in the form of the ultimate ‘bourgeois’ past-time – Marxist theory applied to sport? Or maybe proof that God has a sense of humour – either way Holub is almost certainly correct. When the UK over-supplied the market with golf courses the laws of supply and demand did indeed balance the scale; albeit over a period of a decade.

So how is the Czech Golf Federation planning on securing the future of the market? “We at the CGF also want to focus on junior golf. We want to build the membership base from the

bottom. If you attract one kid you usually attract his/her parents as well.” Holub is clearly focussed.

Again common sense is beginning to establish a welcome hold on golf...

For the architects and developers from Western Europe and the USA there is a problem of geography and politics to overcome. To our shame, it is all too easy to view anything east of Munich as being ‘Eastern European’ and, thus, all the same in a uniform, grey, communist jump-suit. Obviously this is simply untrue and Gaunt has – as have most globetrotting architects – got to know the region pretty well; “Poland has only got eight golf courses, whereas CZ has over 50, so Poland has a long way to go. The problem in Poland is buying land – the communist system split land plots up into thousands of hectare or a few hectare size plots, owned by individuals, families, relatives, etc., which makes the land acquisition process very slow.” Thus the recognition of the results of communism is in the detail – a detail that is not present in the Czech Republic.

One of the other problems in identifying opportunities in the eastern European region is the apparently factual information coming out of respected and well-meaning sources. One such is claiming that we need 3000 new golf courses over the next 15 years and the Czech Republic is at the centre of this growth. Unfortunately the twin evils of statistics and inaccurate record keeping is largely at fault and it is strongly recommended that all such reports be taken with a pinch of salt – especially where CZ is concerned.

As with all things golf, networking is essential when looking to work in the Czech Republic – word of mouth and evidence of success being hard currency, Gaunt again: “I now have a ‘shop-window’ so I can easily take prospective clients to see what I can do and have done successfully.

The client at Kaskada has been really supportive all the way and they are willing to recommend me to other developers and investors. As a matter of course, wherever I am working, I always ensure that although I am working for the developer as my client, after the course is completed and we have played our first game of golf on it, we part company as good friends (normally washed down with a few glasses of local spirit). The great thing about the Czech Republic though is that it is a good place to show my work to prospective clients in other eastern/central European emerging golfing markets – it is so well-placed geographically in this respect.”

As mentioned before the similarities with the Scandinavian market are encouraging in terms of attracting families in general and juniors in particular to the game of golf. Gaunt believes that, just as in Sweden and Norway, now is the time for the quality of golf course on offer to be improved and yet remain open to all: “I recently attended the opening of the Kaskada course in Brno with the President of the Czech Golf Federation, Mr Milan Vesely and Mr Jiri Kovar, Board Member of the Czech Golf Federation – both were very enthusiastic about the need to improve golf facilities throughout the country, and in particular to attract young golfers and particularly women to play. I like their attitude to golf – the tournaments are played by men, women and children, too. They have a very modern attitude towards the sport, like in Scandinavia. Something that will, very soon, I am sure, enable them to produce world-class golfers. It is in stark contrast to the UK, where children are encouraged to take up other sports at school – also where practice facilities, in general are poor and where the attitude of many golf clubs plainly discourages children and women from taking part.”

Photos courtesy of jonathan@gaunt-golf-design.com

