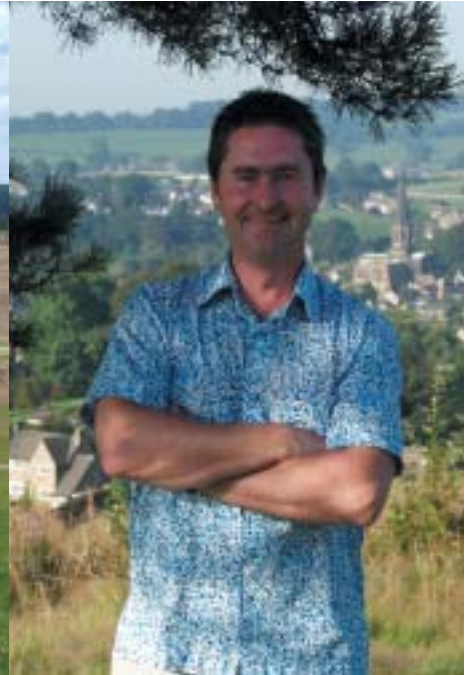


Czech Mate

*Golf development in Eastern Europe continues to be a hive of activity for developers and architects alike, and as **Trevor Ledger** reports, Jonathan Gaunt has just completed his first project in the Czech Republic - Golf Resort Brno Jinacovice.*



The recent KPMG Golf Business Forum in Cyprus indicated that the Czech Republic has been a great growth market for golf over the last five years, although one of the delegates, Jonathan Gaunt, did not need telling.

Originally designed by Gaunt and Marnoch Limited, Golf Resort Brno Jinacovice was handed over to chief executive Vladimír Plasil last month, and in the process, another country laid claim to having received a dose of the Gaunt style.

The 27-hole golf course development in the Moravia region marks a first for Gaunt personally and a neat feather in the cap of his newly formed Gaunt Golf Design - a company created after his amicable split from former partner, Steve Marnoch.

“There was already a ‘rudimentary’ nine-hole course on site before I was brought in,” said Gaunt. “After having assessed the site and undertaken careful consultation with the local authorities (the project is partially owned by Brno City), it was decided to build the new course over it, even though the R&A provided the original owner with a grant of £50,000 towards the development.”

The reasons for such abandonment are clear when the site is viewed as a whole - the existing nine had been designed by a local civil architect and had not recognised the potential the land held, let alone took advantage of it. The fact the client so readily agreed to the new plan is proof that what existed was not suitable.

Demand

The demand for golf in the Czech republic is high from both a local and tourist perspective; with 1,000 members already signed up at Jinacovice and daily Ryanair flights from Stansted to Brno the future for Gaunt’s first adventure in this widely touted golfing ‘hotspot’ looks set to be successful.

For years now the architecture and nightlife of Prague has been a big draw to western tourists and, at a mere two and a half hours from the capital city and a one and a half hour drive from Vienna, Brno is ideally situated to expand on the Czech governmental plan of increased tourism.

If the Czech Republic is an example of a modern tourist growth model, then Gaunt’s involvement in the project is a mirror in terms of how the contract was gained and how the design took shape.

“The first we heard of the potential job was via an email received in Spring 2003 after the client had trawled the net and looked at our website,” explained Gaunt. Masterplanning of the site started in September 2004 after some two months of detailed negotiations on contract details - written in Czech and English.

The sourcing of architect and drawing up of contract owed much to the 21st century, the traditional problems of poor weather became almost Biblical in their intensity.

“Work started on site early May 2005 and continued through to July without much rain. Then we had about four weeks of storms which put us seriously behind schedule. Finally work continued and the seeding works on the first nine-holes and driving range were done by November 2005. Then it snowed and didn’t stop until May 2006; the worst winter for 50 years.”

Expertise

That so much progress was made despite such conditions is testimony to the hi-tech drawings employed by Gaunt and Marnoch (and, subsequently, Gaunt Golf Design) and the expertise of golf course project manager, Chris

Johnson who has been working in Europe, Africa and the Middle East managing golf course construction projects for over 25 years.

“The project would probably have taken twice as long to build without Chris’s involvement,” Gaunt declared, a statement that carries more weight when you consider that the major contractor on the project was Kalab - a local civil engineering contractor, who are also responsible for building the new airport terminal at Brno.

Kalab had no experience of building golf courses, but with Johnson on site the work ran smoothly. He worked closely with the Polish and Czech shapers and they worked with the other, less-specialist, machine operators.

Gaunt was more than happy with the construction team. “Kalab worked very well under difficult conditions and dovetailed well with the irrigation contractor - Profigrass, as well as the drainage and finishing works teams,” he said.

Working in a new country - especially one that has little history of golf - is always a challenge and the earning of respect and trust is crucial for a successful outcome. Gaunt worked hard to achieve this despite a curious start.

“Even though the client had not built a golf course before we still came across the attitude ‘this is how we do things in the Czech Republic’, so it was a challenge.”

Quality

But a challenge that confidence and technology overcame as Gaunt described: “I had to work hard to persuade the client that what I was designing was high quality and that the drawings and documentation was prepared to be followed.

“By this I mean that we produce drawings that we could give to a contractor and know almost 100 per cent that the contractor would be able to build a great golf course if he followed them to the letter.

“Our drawings are accurate, as is our documentation - we use MicroStation software which has been developed specially for golf course architects and we have developed it over the last ten years to provide, what we consider to be the best quality documentation possible in the industry.

“We finally got the client’s confidence within a few days of starting on site - the client saw the course under construction and suddenly it clicked.”

And how it clicked. The resulting golf courses are reminiscent of Gaunt designs across the UK - Redlibbets and Ramside springing to mind as the bold undulations of the Brno site are surveyed. With the ubiquitous ‘challenge for the good golfer, enjoyable by

beginners’ brief in hand, Gaunt set about designing a resort course that took full advantage of a rolling, parkland terrain.

“What has been designed reflects the dramatic Czech landscape, with large rolling fairways, strategically located bunkers and water features, providing stunning waterside green positions. Probably the most challenging is the 18th green, flanked as it is by two large lakes, overlooked by the new clubhouse on the hillside.”

It is difficult for an architect - or anyone else for that matter - to adequately describe the final realisation of a plan but at Brno the fauna and flora indicates where its strength lies.

Flanked

The course is flanked by mature oak forests that are inhabited by deer and Moufflon goats, birds of prey and wild-fowl haunt the fringes and careful specification of rough grasses create a motion and flow to the course that has become a trademark of the Gaunt design over the last 20 years.

What is refreshing about Gaunt the architect is that he is not of the flouncing, egotistical variety. For him the award of a contract is a privilege, not a professional right and he recognises the honour of being chosen.

“Our client was, admittedly, taking a bit of a risk bringing in a British golf course architect to a region of Central Europe that is not considered a golf destination. What he wanted to achieve here, though, was a golf course that would be universally appealing.

“Given the high quality of the site, he has achieved this - that is certain.” Note the praise to client and site; while it might be in his interest to boost the client’s ego one gets the impression that Gaunt means it and is happy for the client to be identified as the prime mover.

The first nine-holes and driving range open for play in September 2006 with the remaining 18 and six-hole academy planned for opening in July 2007. Gaunt is looking forward to the date with very high hopes.

“The standard of construction is actually higher than I have worked to in the UK on hotel and country club standard courses. So, it will stand the test of time - the design is not technology-proof, but they will be fun, exciting and challenging to play - we have three composite layouts within the 27 holes, offering a variety of routes and starting points.

“It’s built to a standard that would allow the client to host a pro’ tournament, and in my opinion, is certainly in the top-ten in terms of construction quality in the Czech Republic,” concluded Gaunt. ☺

