

# Keeping a king happy

By **TREVOR LEDGER**

**W**hen you have to worry about destroying the house of a serving monarch, you know that you'd better get it right. Golf course architect, Jonathan Gaunt is having to do just that on his latest project at Oued Fes in Morocco: "I really had to make sure that I got the drainage absolutely spot on – we cannot allow for any of the properties to flood, ever, nor for the King's Palace to be flooded, either..."

"The course is set on flat land – a flood plain – next to the King Mohammed VI's Palace. Through the centre of the site flows a river known as Oued Fes, which doesn't dry out, even in summer. However, every winter this river floods the valley and threatens to flood the King's Palace, too."

This river is clearly one of the reasons why a golf course is even conceivable in a land that is more noted for arid heat than lush golf courses. Unsurprisingly the tourist Euro (or GBP in this instance) is what has driven the Oued Fes development at such a pace. Gaunt again: "The whole process has been pretty fast-track – the masterplanning of the golf course began in April 2006, when meetings were held for the design team in Rabat.

"This is very much a tourist destination – Fes has the best preserved ancient mediaeval Medina in Morocco and is the venue for an annual world music festival, amongst many other attractions – mosques, citadels, minarets, etc. British tourists are at the heart of the industry over here and that helped me get the job

in the first place; this is my first project in Morocco and the developer is looking to attract British investors/clients for properties on the site."

And there needs to be quite a few one would think given that there are to be five 5-star hotels, a golf hotel, a boutique hotel and 1500 apartments/golf villas. Morocco isn't a traditional golfing destination, although golf has been played here for decades with Robert Trent Jones Senior design at Rabat and a few more since then. However, the plan is for Morocco to be seen as an alternative to the already booming markets in Spain and Portugal that Gaunt believes have been overdeveloped to a degree.

As well as having such an important neighbour, Oued Fes has found a strong ally in King Mohammed as Gaunt explained; "The government has been very supportive – King Mohammed is a very keen golfer and all applications have to be approved by him. Because this project is immediately adjacent to his palace, he was consulted at length, especially regarding the issue of the potential flooding of it and it took an additional six months for his engineers to provide building permits (construction was due to start in April 2007 – it finally started in October 2007)."

It is difficult to get away from the Hollywood notion of Morocco being a brown rocky desert but to hear Gaunt's description of the course is to realise a different actuality; "It will be parkland in nature because half of the site is currently used as a tree nursery (eucalyptus, cypress,

pine and juniper), but there will also be reedbeds, with marshland/wetland, which will offer a completely different character."

It is here that the trademark Gaunt golf course begins to take shape with the aesthetic essences of planting being the framework within which the golf course is formed: "The choice of grasses throughout the course has been of utmost importance for many and varied reasons. On the greens we are using Penn A4/G6 bentgrass to get top quality surfaces and ones that the current visitors to Spain will be used to; on the fairways, greens surrounds, greens approaches and semi-roughs we have opted for hybrid Bermuda 419. It is the most appropriate to this climate and will give the utmost quality; in the roughs is where we will be seeing a great display from the fescue and Moroccan native grasses – these are being used to create a unique visual effect: seed-head roughs that will be golden yellow in the summer. This grass will be pretty drought-tolerant too, which will cut down on the water requirement, in Morocco – an essential consideration."

Even though the river Oued Fes is an ever-present flood potential, water wastage is a thorough 'no-no' in Morocco.

For Gaunt, the most satisfaction has been garnered through a language barrier that he has (just about) overcome: "It has been a challenge to work within a French-speaking design team, with the French architect/masterplanner and landscape architect, Moroccan architects and

technicians, Moroccan engineers and surveyors with only my schoolboy French. It has been so satisfying to make myself – and the design – understood by everyone. I must have made a good enough impression and not made too many linguistic cock-ups because the client was so happy with the work we produced that he asked us to design his next golf resort project – Tamuda Hills, near Tetouan on the Mediterranean Coast."

Additionally, Gaunt is working on several other projects at various stages of development throughout Morocco, a region that seems likely to feature high on a golfing destination list in the very near future. When it comes to golf tourism and the requirements of British/European golfers, Gaunt is quite outspoken on the issue of quality: "I am saddened by how poor many British golf courses are in relation to these new ones being built outside the UK – especially in regions with only a handful of courses so far; proportionally, the quality is higher outside the UK than inside. I predict that in the next 25 to 30 years, the UK will lose its title as being the possessor of the best golf courses in the world, unless the existing golf clubs begin to invest heavily in improving their facilities: clubhouse, additional leisure facilities, infrastructure, drainage, irrigation, green, tee and bunker renovation."

Whether Gaunt is proved right or not remains to be seen but the proof of the Oued Fes pudding will be evident in the spring of 2009 following the construction sign off in October 2008.