

The ultimate playground

The sandy site at Lisbon's Terras da Comporta is perfect for golf, but it needed patience, perseverance and sensitivity to turn it into the world's new superstar

Terras da Comporta's narrative is already a long and intriguing one despite it only just becoming fully open for play – but its story and its legend are only just beginning.

The tale of Comporta stretches back as far as 2008, when Scottish architect David McLay Kidd was introduced to land which he felt, at first sight, was as good as that on which he built the original and much-revered course at Bandon Dunes.

His client was the Espirito Santo bank,

one of Europe's most well-known business dynasties. It was a seemingly perfect combination: an epic piece of terrain, a client with financial muscle, and a world-class architect.

However, it was not a straightforward development. There were false starts in the initial years, but between 2012 and 2014 there was real progress on the development and it was close to completion. However, Espirito Santo ran into financial difficulties and construction stopped.

It lay dormant for six years, until Vanguard Properties acquired the development and reached out to Oregon-based Kidd.

Yet there were still obstacles to overcome. When construction was fully underway, again, the world had to deal with the small matter of a global pandemic.

Kidd was able to make a trip to Portugal with special dispensation from the government, but he was not able to bring his American-based construction crew.

Fortunately, he had the perfect man for the job of finishing what had been started six years earlier: his former staff shaper Conor Walsh, who now runs his own business, decamped to Portugal with his team.

Now, two and a half years later, the Dunas course is fully open and the wait has been worthwhile.

It has been instantly ranked as the number nine course in Continental Europe. To enter such a competitive ranking in the top 10 is nothing short of sensational and is



MY VISION FOR THE DUNAS COURSE

By David McLay Kidd

I'm a giant fan of the short par, the drivable par 4, which Tom Weiskopf brought back in his design career. So, on the front nine we have the 8th hole and it's eminently drivable. You tee off level with the green but the fairway sits maybe 20 feet below you, but there's a speed slot on the left that is actually higher than the green. So if you're feeling lucky, you can try and catch that speed slot off the tee. That might be a couple of hundred yards' carry, but the ball will scoot another 60-70 yards and make it on to the green if you catch it. The green is absolutely massive. So you've got this giant fairway and a huge green on a relatively short, drivable hole. It gives you all sorts of options. Are you going to go for broke and try and put it on the green, or maybe you lay up with a 6-iron and then hit a wedge? Those are choices that an average golfer will have the ability to make. Whereas a lot of courses, even those in Scotland, are extremely strategic, but only for really low-handicappers. At Comporta, we tried to bring that thrill of strategy to the average guy.

'COMPORTA IS A UNIQUE AND BREATHTAKINGLY BEAUTIFUL ECOSYSTEM AND WE HAVE THE OBLIGATION TO PRESERVE IT'

An artist's impression of the clubhouse.



the perfect illustration of just how special the Dunas course is.

Kidd is the first to acknowledge that he struck it lucky with this site. The peninsula on which the course sits is completely sand, populated with only pines and native vegetation. What's more, there is pleasing elevation across the site, giving rise to valleys, which are perfect for all-world golf holes to be built in them.

The site is set back a kilometre from the beach, which is the guidance imposed by the Portuguese government, and travels through a pine forest with a beautiful low heathland dune scrub beneath it and myriad little heathers and short vegetation. So, from Kidd's point of view, he started with an absolutely compelling landscape.

He wanted the course to look and feel weathered and not have an impact on the wider landscape, hence the use of cool-season grasses; rather than using an aggressive Bermuda grass that would creep out into the forest, they used fescues that would be used in Scotland in the summertime. In short, a sand base and grasses that will promote firm, fast golf and a rare ability to use the 'running game' in Continental Europe.

As a champion of sustainable golf, Kidd needed no encouragement or instruction to choose a path of least disturbance on such a wonderful site.

"I would hope that when a golfer finished playing and you ask them what their experience was, they'd talk as much about the landscape they just played through as the golf holes they experienced," he says. "That is exceptionally valuable to us. That is the key to it.

"We embraced all of the native vegetation – we have bunker edges that are wispy, we have bunker bases that have native scrub vegetation growing in them.

"We are using grasses that will limit water use, so everything we've tried to do on the Dunas course is about limiting the inputs and maximising the benefit to the wider landscape.

"The course takes up a very, very small amount of land and will create the resources and impetus to protect a much larger parcel of land.

"That entire coastline is under threat because you've either got non-native pine trees that were planted for timber or paper production, which are obviously not suited, or you have native pine trees that are under threat from a beetle that's killing them. So, infected trees needed to be removed immediately to stop the spread of disease and the trees that are non-native needed to be removed to allow the native trees to thrive – and the course allows those things to happen."

McLay Kidd's ethos was very much in line with that of the whole development. "Comporta is a unique and breathtakingly beautiful ecosystem and we have the obligation to preserve it," says José Cardoso Botelho, CEO of Vanguard Properties. "We are committed to making this project a true example of best practices in the chapter of sustainability, because only by doing that can we ensure a better future for all."

Aware of its responsibilities, Vanguard Properties had no doubts when it came to defining sustainability as the project's founding value. Balance was, therefore,

always emphasised in the development of Terras da Comporta, as environmentally-friendly behaviour and sustainable solutions were adopted.

The characteristics of the local climate and environment and the preservation of biodiversity and nature were guiding principles of an ecological sensibility that is intrinsic to Terras da Comporta.

Two five-star hotels are planned here but will most likely be made of wood. All real estate will be carbon neutral and there will be no concrete in the clubhouse.

The entire real estate will produce solar energy and be able to share it back with the rest of the development, so 80 percent of Comporta's energy needs will be produced in its grounds. Vanguard are also working on a project to recycle water used in the local rice fields for irrigation.

Make no mistake, however, that this commitment to sustainability and environmentally friendly practice during and after construction has not hindered the development of a magnificent golf course. The Dunas course is already world-class.

Imagine hole after hole routed along wide fairways, lined by corridors of mature trees, where playability off the tee is paramount but where there is always a better side of the fairway to approach the green from and sometimes dramatic reward for a bold line. Kidd's design makes you feel aggressive, confident and excited.

There are sporty par 4s, epic par 5s and par 3s that are rarely less than outstanding – the 6th is cut between two dunes, the breathtaking 17th an icon-in-the-making.

Very clearly, Terras da Comporta is the new superstar of European golf.