

Slovakia's gem

Jonathan Davison has routed a remarkable course through the pine woods in Penati

Adam Lawrence paid a visit to Slovakia's leading golf resort and came away very impressed

When golf is first developing in a new market, you ideally need two things. There ought to be a reasonable number of low cost public access venues that encourage local people to take up the game. But you also need, at some point, a genuinely high class course that sets the standard for the future and helps those new to the game understand just how wonderful an experience a day on the golf course can be. Golf has expanded across central and eastern Europe quite quickly in the twenty years since the fall of the Berlin wall. The

Czech Republic, for example, now has more than fifty courses, and a thriving golf market of local players. Across the border in Slovakia, growth has been slower. But now, the country has its first genuinely world-class course. English golf architect Jonathan Davison is, he freely admits, a lucky man. In today's golf development market, getting that elusive first project is tough for any designer. To get your break on a piece of property that, for a range of well-travelled observers, calls to mind courses such as Morfontaine, St George's Hill and Pine Valley is the stuff of

dreams. I feel confident in asserting that no debutant architect has had a site as good as Davison's new Heritage course at the Penati resort since David McLay Kidd was let loose on Bandon Dunes. With pure sand, great topography and tall pines, Penati is a golf designer's dream. Davison, who hails from the north-east of England (but don't call this passionate Sunderland fan a Geordie!), trained on the Edinburgh College of Art's former diploma programme, before working in Ireland with established architect Jeff Howes. He relocated to Central Europe to join fellow Englishman

Jeremy Ford, building courses in Poland and the Czech Republic. Now, he has gone solo, and in Penati, has made a remarkable debut. Davison's course is the second at Penati; the first, by Nicklaus Design architect Dirk Bouts, opened in 2012. Both courses were routed before either designer was engaged, by a local landscape architect, and this is perhaps Penati's biggest flaw. Davison was able to tweak the routing of the Heritage course to a certain extent, creating the lovely uphill par three twelfth as a result, but it's probably true to say that neither course gets the most out of the site. In

“With pure sand, great topography and tall pines, Penati is a golf designer's dream”

Where the golf industry meets



Join leading golf industry professionals for the best international networking and business development event of the year.

The Golf Business Forum is the leading annual meeting place for the golf industry. Over 250 delegates from over 40 countries, coming from all sectors of the industry, will join us in Abu Dhabi marking the 11th edition of the annual event and the inaugural event to be sponsored by HSBC, one of the world's largest financial institutions and a major supporter of golf worldwide.

The programme will focus around key industry sectors including Innovation, Performance, Tourism, Communication, Sustainability, Leadership and The Sport of Golf. Speakers, presentations and focus groups will not only be from the leaders of golf's great businesses, but will also incorporate innovators and respected voices from outside of the industry.

Venue: The Westin Abu Dhabi Golf Resort & Spa

Date: April 28 – 30, 2014

For more information, and to register, please visit
www.golfbusinessforum.com



The Heritage course is strong from start to finish

particular, there are more holes on the lower, flatter areas near the clubhouse than one might wish. This is true on many highly regarded older courses too – think of Machrihanish – but in that case, the reason is a need to site the clubhouse close to the public road. At Penati, an entrance road in excess of 2km long was built; it's hard to believe the higher land couldn't have played a larger role.

Carping out of the way, it's time to celebrate the quality of Davison's work at Penati. While the front nine mostly traverses the lower areas, it contains some strong golf holes, including the split fairway par four second, the fine par five third, whose green sits behind a ridge, visible from far away, but blind from closer, and the pretty downhill par three fourth. The water-based eighth and ninth are perhaps a little out of kilter with the rest, but the latter, which wraps round the big lake on which Penati's real estate sits, is a fine rendition of the classic Cape-style par five. Two bold shots will see the golfer onto the green, or the more cautious can tack their way around the water – though they should note that the second shot layup area is a little narrower than one might wish!

It's the Heritage's back nine, though, that takes the plaudits. The tenth inhabits the flat ground, but from the eleventh to the seventeenth, players will traverse terrain good enough to grace any golf course on

earth – and the holes Davison has built on this magnificent property do it ample justice.

The par five eleventh is probably the best hole on the entire course. As with the third, the green sits behind a ridge, which has attractive bunker dug into its face. Two strong shots will enable the player to crest this ridge, and possibly find the green, while failure to do so leaves a blind third shot. Davison's greensite was a natural punchbowl; nervous of the amount of surface water flowing down the surrounding slopes, he opted to raise the surface with fill, and, along with shaper Mick McShane, built a challenging green. It was, I think, the right decision – Slovakia is a golf market in its infancy, and giving greenkeepers unnecessary worries would be the wrong thing to do – though it's easy to imagine how delightful the hole would have been with the green sitting in its hollow.

After the tiny par three twelfth, a wedge uphill to a severely contoured green with a particularly demonic front pin location, the thirteenth presents a tee shot from an elevated tee across scrub and fescue. Bunkers on the high right side of the fairway protect the best line – there is tons of room to the left, but the approach is much tougher from down there. A view across the property line from this fairway reveals what the site looked like before construction – a huge expanse of bare

yellow sand, interspersed with occasional pine trees. It's spectacular.

The fourteenth is a long, downhill par three, with the view of the green partially blocked by bunkers and a severely front-to-back sloping green. If any hole in today's game demands a running approach, it might be this one. And the great golf continues on the par four fifteenth and sixteenth and the par five seventeenth, which plays from a high tee back down onto the flat land. The eighteenth green has water to the left and behind, and creates a splendid amphitheatre in front of the clubhouse terrace, along with the home hole of Bouts' Legend course.

Penati is a remarkable place. Many in the European golf industry have been aware for some time of the great golfing land to be found in countries such as Slovakia and Poland, and a fair number of strong courses have been built in those regions. And it is fair to say that neither of the two courses at Penati is all it might have been; the land is so good that a truly remarkable course could have been built there. All that said, Davison's Heritage course is a remarkable debut. Strong from start to finish, it will disappoint nobody, and the run of holes on the back nine would look good in virtually any company. It will be fascinating to see what this young architect does next: but he will be lucky indeed if his next project brings him a site this good. **GCA**