

// TOP 100 SPOTLIGHT

CAPTAIN'S PICK

It takes something special to embellish the beauty of Greece's southern coastline, but in delivering a sumptuous test in harmony with its stunning location, Costa Navarino's Dunes layout pulls it off, says Chris Bertram.



When a self-made millionaire buys his local football club, he usually does so with the best of intentions – even if there is a certain crushing inevitability that it will not lead to the trophies and glory he envisages.

These same wealthy characters dip their toe in golf resort development from time to time too, and while these ventures are not quite the inevitable money-burning exercise that owning a football team is, there are plenty of examples of where it has gone wrong. Often badly and expensively wrong. Usually they have no experience in tourism or indeed golf, and that can lead to poor decisions and a struggle from the start.

These are not, however, labels that could be applied to the Costa Navarino resort on Greece's southern Peloponnese coastline.


The affluent man in question on this occasion is Vassilis Constantakopoulos, whose working life began as a deck hand and ended with him owning a shipping company as well as extensive property development interests.

Known simply as 'The Captain', Constantakopoulos was

determined to build his dream resort above the golden sands of Navarino Bay, but without ruining the breathtaking beauty of the Messinia area.

Dream became reality in 2010, helped by a suspected multi-million euro outlay. The two golf courses are but one attraction of a resort that has two spectacularly high-end hotels – the Westin and Romanos – myriad restaurants, a water park, several pools, its own section of gorgeous beach, a superb spa, and extensive leisure activities. The characterful village of Gialova and historic port of Pylos are also there to explore, but you may well feel there's enough within the resort to never leave until it is time to fly home.

The Bay course – by Robert Trent Jones and which opened a year later – is 15 minutes' drive from the main resort but is worth the short journey; with views of the bay from all but three holes, this is one of Continental Europe's most scenic courses.

The Dunes is very much within the main hub though, its 1st tee just three minutes' walk from the Westin. It was designed by Ross McMurray, of European Golf Design, in association with Bernhard Langer. The German was clearly hired for his cachet but was predictably assiduous in his task, walking every hole and hitting shots during 

Costa Navarino's Dunes take you from a seaside 'links' feel on the coast to more typically Greek terrain of olive and citrus groves.

construction, and looking over every detail. He studied the construction plans in detail from his US home and sent extensive notes back to McMurray, especially regarding the design of the greens.

While The Captain wanted a sympathetic build of both the courses and the wider resort, hundreds of tonnes of earth were moved and the shaping of the dirt intended to reflect the rugged outlines of the distant mountains. McMurray also sought to provide links character, especially on holes closest to the sea. Large, undulating greens and steep-faced pot bunkers were also formed to emphasise the links feel, but as the course moved away from the sea they softened the look slightly to fit more sensitively within a typically Greek landscape of olive and citrus groves.

The course is 6,619 yards – not monstrously long by modern standards – and there are generally reasonably wide fairways to aim for, with the penalties for erroneous strikes instead being large bunkers and raised greens that reject miss-hit approaches.

McMurray wanted to create a resort course that would be fun for average players but provide enough of a challenge so that stronger golfers would feel they had been properly tested. It rewards accurate shot-making because of the greens' design and the strategic positioning of the bunkers, and it's all made much trickier by the wind you often get as a result of its coastal location. Many of the putting surfaces are divided into plateaus with some quite

'The terrain was designed to reflect the rugged outlines of the distant mountains'

steep slopes between the different levels so, although their size makes the greens relatively easy to hit, if your approach shots don't find the right part of the green you are looking at three putts.

It's the sort of course you can plot your way around sensibly or be bolder and take on greater risks. There are a couple of driveable par 4s and two or three reachable par 5s, but there are some real penalties if you get it wrong.

Indeed, the Dunes starts with an encouragingly open drive, although there is water on the left to present just enough danger to get the juices flowing. It definitely feels like an appetiser for the main course of the 2nd, a downhill hole to a green whose backdrop is the Ionian Sea.

The uphill par 5 that follows knocks some of the giddiness out of you, requiring two good biffs to get you anywhere near the green, with the second shot blind over a rise in the hill. The approach is to a really funky green that is more than 100 yards wide and quite shallow, so it is hard to hold with a long club. Even if you manage that but find a portion of the green a good distance from the day's pin position, you might easily end up tapping in for par. Whatever score you make, you can then look back down the yards just covered and enjoy the breathtaking view of the sea.

A twisting right-to-left par 4 follows, playing along an undulating fairway to a really funky green that tilts towards you and has a back tier. It is notable that no two holes the same on this impressive first four.

The theme of variation continues with the first short hole, the 5th, with a spectacular mountain backdrop as you hit down to quite a small target, with surrounding bushes giving it an enclosed feel. The ever-interesting topography this time sees a mound 30 yards short of the green teasing your sense of distance, and it is certain the hollow between the mound and the green will gather a lot of balls.

It is the first of a fine collection of short holes, even if you



As you would expect for a course laid out alongside the southern Peloponnese coastline, the Dunes' views are regularly spectacular.

THE SIGNATURE HOLE

A CLASSIC RISK OR REWARD

The 1st on the Dunes course definitely feels like an appetiser for the main course of the 2nd. This downhill hole is both aesthetically pleasing and strategically satisfying, which is a fairly good commendation. So, while it offers a beautiful view of the Ionian Sea, it also asks you to think as you breathe in the scenic splendour.

This sporty two-shotter lets you can have a crack with driver to get up close to the green, whose backdrop is the Ionian Sea, or lay up short of the bunkers and hit an achingly tempting wedge approach.

It is well bunkered off the tee though, so lay-ups have to be considered shots – and also because hitting your approach from the right side of the fairway is beneficial given the green slopes from right to left.

If the pin is cut on the left half of the green you have to be careful to ensure you take enough club because anything short will be swept away by the swales, leaving a difficult chip.

Flying the green also leaves an exacting up and down but essentially you are just enjoying the location and probably walking off with a par or better.



2nd HOLE
PAR 4, 320 YARDS



Darkness descends on Costa Navarino, a resort with enough options to entertain day and night.

are left thinking the Dunes perhaps lacks an all-world one. The 8th is the Dunes' 'long' par 3, stretching to more than 200 yards, while the back nine starts with a pretty mid-length downhill one. Perhaps the best is the penultimate hole, playing slightly downhill and guarded by sand and mounds with a hint of an old-fashioned links bowl green. The green is wide and shallow with lots of movement.


The Dunes offers stiff challenges too. The 7th is uphill and the front nine's hardest hole as it funnels towards an elevated green, which has a couple of tiers in it. A bunker in front of the green makes you think the stupid play is to be short, but you can't play too long for safety because a hollow behind the shallow tiered green is a tricky place to chip from.

Then there is a tight drive on the 9th, along an undulating fairway with mounding on both sides that takes you back to the clubhouse.

One of the finest holes is the 6th, a dramatically downhill short par 4 with a ring of bunkers defending the green, which has a ridge

across the middle that is so pronounced you can see it from the tee. It's a fun hole with an amazing view of the surrounding countryside.

The finish is strong. The 16th turns you right to left as you drive to the top of the hill and then play down towards a well-bunkered green; it is a nice change of pace and scene. The green is seriously sporty too to add a bit more fun. After the short 17th, the 18th tee makes you realise you have rarely had much idea of where you are within the site, so well sheltered are you from other holes and other golfers. So, it is something of a revelation when the home hole tee take you uphill, through frequent elevation changes, and reveals you are about to return to the heart of the resort.

Clearly, then, The Captain chose a good site to create his dream golf resort, but he had to use it correctly or he could go the way of all the wide-eyed, well-meaning millionaires who got their fingers burnt in football clubs or golf resorts. Anyone visiting Costa Navarino will soon see this is far from a story with a sad ending. 

HOW WE RANKED COSTA NAVARINO

