

# DESERT CLASSICS

**To celebrate the playing of his 1,000th course, Rob Smith revels in a whirlwind tour of the United Arab Emirates...**



**W**hen I first stumbled across golf 40 years ago, I instinctively ticked off where I had played in the index of the *Sunday Telegraph Golf Course Guide*. As the count rose and technology took over from paper, I transferred to using a spreadsheet.

Thanks to *Golf Monthly*, over the last decade I have been lucky enough to visit and write about courses all over the world. The tally has risen dramatically, up by more than 180 in the last three years alone. The number

1,000 had therefore been looming for some time, and I finished last year with just four to go. I was keen to mark this with a special course that would be memorable and different, but also welcoming to all.

Happily, I very occasionally also write for Troon Golf, the world's largest third-party manager of golf clubs and courses, which now operates in more than 30 countries. In January, the opportunity arose to visit and play all of its partners in the UAE – eight clubs and nine courses. It was the perfect way to

reach my milestone. I had been to Dubai before and thoroughly enjoyed The Emirates Club and Dubai Creek, especially the Majlis course, which hosts the Dubai Desert Classic each year. This time, however, I was in for an extensive look at the nation's golfing delights in a climate where sunshine and warmth is all but guaranteed.

I began my four-day adventure by flying to Dubai and taking a taxi to the Hilton Al Hamra Beach and Golf Resort in the most northerly of the seven Emirates. Here, the large, airy hotel was

The links-desert hybrid at Arabian Ranches



The 3rd hole at Al Hamra



the ideal place to relax and freshen up from the flight, perfectly located right by the clubhouse for my first game.

### DAY ONE

The course at Al Hamra was designed by Peter Harradine, who is something of a local specialist. Opened in 2007, it runs alongside and through purpose-built lagoons and housing, with water coming regularly into play. I was slightly hampered by early morning mist, so although I am pretty sure the front nine has some fine holes, especially the

## United Arab Emirates

scary par-5 5th, I know that the back nine does! Both 11 and 12 are great fun, and the closing hole is a wonderful long hole, a kind of mirror image of the 18th at Pebble Beach. The first seven and closing two holes have floodlights and combine seamlessly to offer a night-time alternative.

After brunch, I followed the coast south for 30 minutes or so to the striking and very different Al Zorah. This young Nicklaus Design course has been built in and over a tidal mangrove swamp. Wooden boardwalks link some of the holes, and a real bonus of this wild setting – a kind of Asiatic Royal West Norfolk – is the frequent encounters with birdlife. I saw what may well have been a marsh harrier, and I also saw what is definitely a very strong golf course. Kept in superb condition, there is plenty to thrill, particularly at the four short holes which all flirt with the marsh. I was very taken with the whole set-up here.

### DAY TWO

While I had not even heard of the two Als before researching my trip, I had received nothing but glowing praise for Saadiyat Beach. Situated on raised dunes just outside Abu Dhabi, this extremely sandy Gary Player masterpiece was the 999th course on my CV and the start of a special day for me. I was joined for my golf by James, one of Troon's young, typically genial and capable staffers.

The two nines form a figure of eight round the clubhouse, and although there are hotels and houses in a few places, they are always a long way from the line of play... even for me. This is a serious championship test and you need to choose your tees accordingly. Having said that, it is a sumptuous feast of golf all the way. Several of the holes would serve as the signature design at most other courses, and the finishing few are simply terrific.

I then set off for the big milestone at Abu Dhabi Golf Club, where I was allocated the locker used by Jamie Donaldson when he won the HSBC Championship in 2013. Seven days before, the National course had hosted the thrilling conclusion of this year's championship, where Tommy Fleetwood successfully defended his title against a star-studded field.

The National course was designed to be, and most certainly is, a first-class tournament test of the very



Saadiyat Beach is a 'masterpiece'

highest order. Beautiful to behold and in peak European Tour condition, it features plenty of doglegs, water on half the holes, trees and bushes, perfectly placed bunkering and excellent greens. It's another must-play in a land with more than its fair share, and the most surprising statistic from

my round was that given my emotional and physical state, I lost only one ball!

Typical of the professional and friendly approach from both Troon and the club, I was met on the 18th tee by a small welcoming party brandishing a bottle of champagne. Keen to keep my wits about me, I reluctantly restricted

## Favourite fairways

Looking for diversity in terms of both style and location, I'm not saying these are absolutely the finest ten courses I've ever played. The list could, and probably would, change

with the wind. They are, however, ten completely wonderful places to play that I would unhesitatingly recommend to any keen golfer.

**Cape Kidnappers // New Zealand** The aerial photos alone make this a shoe-in bucket-list course, and a stay at this spectacularly beautiful estate is a holiday in heaven.

**Costa Navarino // Greece** Both courses at this idyllic golfing destination are lovely, with my preference being the Bay. The panoramic views are outstanding.



Natural beauty on offer at Tandridge



Rob in exalted company at Abu Dhabi GC



myself to just the one glass and escaped with a zig-zag bogey. An appropriate finish for me to a most memorable and landmark round.

I wondered how it would feel to complete 1,000 courses and reach my Holy Grail, and the simple answer was pride mixed with a fleeting nostalgia for all that has happened during those 40 years. In hitting the target, I haven't exactly done anything to help humanity or found a cure for cancer, but nonetheless it is an achievement and I will be forever grateful to everyone, both professionally and personally, who has helped to get me there. I am, more than anything, massively lucky.

I now had time to look around the amazing clubhouse, bag some souvenirs and take a short breather. An hour or so later, I joined one of the young pros, Louis, and a couple of holidaying visitors to play night golf over the adjacent and very enjoyable nine-hole Garden course. In such exalted company, this stands up very well in its own right. It looked impressive under floodlight and I suspect would be even more so during the day. Immediately next door, the Westin is a large, friendly hotel that is a perfect base for golf in the area.

### DAY THREE

Following another early start, it was a little over an hour to my next stop, The Els Club, Dubai. Yet again I was genuinely surprised and impressed by how different this was to any of the other courses I was visiting. It is as



The majestic Thracian Cliffs in Bulgaria

**Fancourt Links // South Africa**  
This demanding and superbly designed Gary Player course has it all. It's a modern masterpiece.

**Kingsbarns // Scotland**  
Fife is the home of golf, and I could have chosen the Old Course for atmosphere, but instead plumped for this fabulous Kyle Phillips design.

**Kington // England**  
Every such list needs its hidden gem, and even without its charming golf,

the highest course in England has the finest views in the country.

**Old Head // Ireland**  
So long as the weather behaves, this is undoubtedly the most exhilarating and breathtaking rollercoaster ride in the whole of the UK and Ireland.

**Royal Porthcawl // Wales**  
Links golf is wonderful, life-affirming and in our blood, and this is a superb example of a traditional and testing such course of the highest calibre.

**Sunningdale // England**  
If ever there was a timeless, atmospheric and simply perfect venue for golf, Sunningdale is it. The only question is Old or New? Both.

**Tandridge // England**  
Having been a member of this renovated Harry Colt classic since 1994, I'm obviously biased, but I'm still excited and enthused by this beautiful course every time.

**Thracian Cliffs // Bulgaria**  
A stunning coastal setting, a visual feast from start to finish, a real test of golf and as photogenic as they come, Thracian Cliffs is real-life fantasy golf.

## United Arab Emirates

pretty as a picture and I can't see how anyone would not delight in its lush, sumptuous and alluring appearance. The conditioning, in particular the greens, which were running at eleven, was immaculate. On top of this, it's tough! There are run-offs that make accuracy on approaches vital, but even if you end up in no man's land, it would be hard not to enjoy golf here. I loved it.

Boasting an informal and very clubby atmosphere, Arabian Ranches has a relaxing feel which is very welcoming. Many ex-pats choose to base themselves here and the off-course facilities are particularly strong, with a first-class, state-of-the-art academy. As for the course, this is an easy walking, links-desert hybrid that is a collaboration between Ian Baker-Finch and Nicklaus Design.

Bucking the modern trend, water hazards are conspicuous by their absence. Instead, the former Open Champion has paid homage to his victory at Royal Birkdale by creating a course that is strongly bunkered, and where the bump-and-run is a key element. I preferred the back nine, particularly the long 13th, the drive-and-pitch 15th and the tough short 17th played into the wind. Yet again, and all the better for it, it is something completely different.

My home for the final two nights was the remarkable Jumeirah Beach – a busy, modern and extremely stylish hotel with outstanding views out over the Burj Al Arab and the sea, and across to The Palm. The majority of Dubai's excellent courses and attractions are a short and comparatively inexpensive taxi ride away.

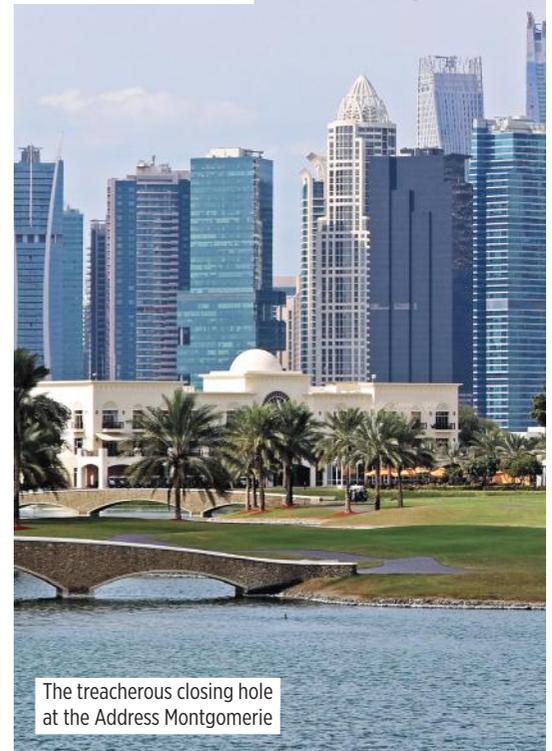
### DAY FOUR

My (thankfully!) late-morning round was at Address Montgomerie, right next door to the Emirates Club but remarkably different in style. I know I am getting repetitive, but the diversity of style on display at all of the courses I visited cannot be overstated.

Here, the first three holes of each nine ease you in, but the remainder are all memorable and there are some very exciting water holes, including the par 3s at 6 and 13. The snaking par-5 9th is another cracker, and the long 18th is quite probably the most thrilling or intimidating closing hole in the country. Water eats in on either side of the fairway, and as if that isn't enough, there is a large pond sitting right in front of the green, which even then has



You'll find a variety of birdlife in the UAE



The treacherous closing hole at the Address Montgomerie

The 9th hole at The Track, Meydan





bunkers for protection. Dubai's stunning architecture provides a fabulous backdrop, and in a way this hole encapsulates something of everything that is golf in the UAE.

My final port of call was the nine-holer at The Track, Meydan, so named as it is right beside the famous racecourse that is home to the Dubai World Cup. Timed in order to enjoy the sunset and then play under floodlights, it was a perfect end to my gallop round the UAE. Run on pay-and-play lines, I expected this to be more of a beginner's venue. It most certainly is not, but is rather a demanding,

full-length course where into the wind, several greens are unreachable in regulation by a mid-teen handicapper like me. Its greatest strengths are the excellent greens, challenging water hazards and the fun of playing a round under floodlights in under two hours.

With even more on the way, there are already plenty of other courses in the UAE, mainly centred around Dubai. These include the Earth course at Jumeirah Estates, home to the DP World Tour Championship, and Gil Hanse's design at Trump International Dubai. The region is also packed with sporting and leisure pursuits to satisfy even the most demanding tourist. I am delighted that my personal Race to Dubai was a complete success, enabling me to reach the magic 1,000 at the same time as experiencing nine remarkably dissimilar golf courses.

In view of the local climate and starting point of desert



'Remarkable': the Jumeirah Beach hotel



A momentous achievement for Rob

location, I had expected a certain unavoidable similarity at each venue, but I was proved pleasantly wrong. While the UAE is not golf's most inexpensive destination, for world-class courses, guaranteed weather and the very best accommodation, food and service, it's impossible to beat – a one-in-a-thousand winner.

## ESSENTIALS

### How to get there

Several airlines fly from our larger airports to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, including Emirates (emirates.com), BA (ba.com) and Etihad (etihad.com)

### Where to play

- **Abu Dhabi Golf Club**  
W: [adgolfclub.com](http://adgolfclub.com)
- **Address Montgomerie**  
W: [themontgomerie.com](http://themontgomerie.com)
- **Al Hamra**  
W: [alhamragolf.com](http://alhamragolf.com)
- **Al Zorah**  
W: [alzorahgolfclub.ae](http://alzorahgolfclub.ae)
- **Arabian Ranches**  
W: [arabianranchesgolf.dubai.com](http://arabianranchesgolf.dubai.com)
- **Els Club, Dubai**  
W: [elsclubdubai.com](http://elsclubdubai.com)
- **Saadiyat Beach**  
W: [sbgolfclub.ae](http://sbgolfclub.ae)
- **The Track, Meydan**  
W: [meydangolf.com](http://meydangolf.com)

### Where to stay

- **Hilton, Al Hamra**  
W: [www3.hilton.com](http://www3.hilton.com)
- **Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Dubai**  
W: [jumeirah.com/Jumeirah-Beach-Hotel](http://jumeirah.com/Jumeirah-Beach-Hotel)
- **Westin Abu Dhabi Golf Resort**  
W: [westinabudhabigolfresort.com](http://westinabudhabigolfresort.com)

For more information on Troon golf resorts, visit [troon.com](http://troon.com)