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## Drive for modernity

By Simon Brooke

A new breed of European golf resort is a world away from traditional rivals



The Oitavos Hotel

A lone seagull hovers in the wind for a few seconds before apparently giving in to the fierce gusts that sweep in from the Atlantic and diving out of sight behind a distant sand dune. Moments later my golf ball follows it, also buffeted by the wind. Will I, like my airborne friend, call it a day? Or will I try to hit the ball out of the bunker and carry on? The smirk on my opponent's face gives me the resolve I need.

In my defence, we're playing at one of the most challenging courses in the world, the Oitavos Dunes, near Lisbon. Opened 10 years ago, its designer, the celebrated course architect Arthur Hills, maintained the striking features of this rugged, windswept land, incorporating three distinct forms – a forested area of umbrella pine trees, sand dunes and open, rocky coastal sections.

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Eventually conceding defeat, I trudge with my more experienced Portuguese opponent back to the hotel. On one side is the vast expanse of the Atlantic, on the other are the Sintra hills, their sparse greenery crowned with mists. Above us, clouds scud by, driven by unceasing winds.

It's not just the landscape that is so stark and dramatic. With its vast windows, neo-industrial design and minimalist interior, the hotel we're staying in, the new five-star Oitavos, is very unlike traditional golf hotels. Creaking leather armchairs,

wood-panelled walls and thick carpets – all imbued with smell of boiled vegetables – are nowhere to be seen and neither are the traditional blazers, Pringle sweaters and loud trousers.

Every window of the Oitavos affords a view of the sea, hills, sky or the striking yellow of the dunes and their contrasting green and purple vegetation. From its spa to its restaurants, serving a modern take on traditional Portuguese cuisine, the hotel is strikingly modern.

"Modernity is something I was born with," says owner Miguel Champalimaud. "The fact that golf is an old sport with many traditions and origins in Scotland does not imply that the clubhouses or the hotels associated with the sport need to be bound by the weight of tradition or have to look traditional in style."

The Oitavos is one of a number of hotels which are shaking up the traditions of the golfing holiday. Chris Jones, editor of Golf World magazine, says: "In our New for 2011 Top 100 Courses in Europe, each of the dozen or so latest entries has a new, modern hotel alongside it, complete with state-of-the-art spas, interiors by well-known designers, infinity pools and Michelin-starred restaurants."

Like the Oitavos, the Costa Navarino golf resort in Messinia, Greece, opened last year with a second course available from this month. Here too, the interior design is simple and unfussy and, with its emphasis on organic elements, such as stone and marble, is intended to complement the natural surroundings, with a gesture to the ancient Greek ruins around it.

Another departure is the concern for the environment and sustainable tourism – something that notoriously thirsty, fertiliser-intensive golf courses have never previously been very bothered about.

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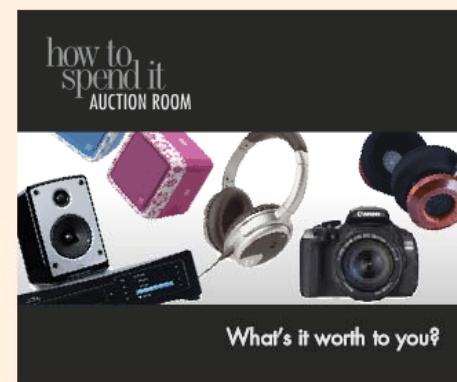
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At the Costa Navarino, two specially constructed reservoirs gather a very small percentage of the local rivers' winter run-off and cover the irrigation needs of the resort and its golf courses. The courses have been planted with a variety of grass that requires less water, while a sophisticated electronic system for course irrigation utilises climatic data from weather-monitoring stations, installed on the courses, to calculate the optimum amount of water required. Organic fertilisers are used.

Situated just outside Barcelona, the PGA Catalunya Resort is set against a backdrop that inspired Dalí and Gaudí. These modernist visionaries would certainly have approved of its contemporary look, although the clean lines and minimal detailing might not have appealed. They do, however, allow the striking landscape to speak for itself. Stone flooring and picture windows, especially in the new villas, blur the distinction between interior and exterior. In some, you can lie in bed and gaze out at the course you're about to tackle.

"Modern design is in keeping with Catalanian culture," says Miguel Girbes, golf manager. "The white building reflects its Mediterranean location, while the black stone at its base gives the impression of it floating. There's no doubt the modern hotel, clubhouse and residences excite and inspire the younger generation – I think they naturally feel comfortable in these informal spaces."

Further south, near Valencia, the simple, spacious architecture and expanses of glass of the newly refurbished Parador de El Saler are also intended to allow guests to feel part of the natural environment, in this case, the Albufera Nature Reserve.

At the other end of the continent, in Finland, the well-established Linna Golf estate, which has welcomed the country's presidents and wealthiest industrialists for over 90 years, has seen the conversion of an old farm and barn complex into a stylish clubhouse, complete with 18 luxury suites. Its very understated organic look contrasts with its grand neighbour.

"Golf is a relatively new game in Finland and it continues to grow," says Mika Walkamo, chairman of Linna Golf. "We've created a place where people can relax and enjoy the golf and natural environment, but which also merges seamlessly with modern home and business life."

As with other modern golf resorts, the spa is important here, building on the traditional Finnish love of saunas. This is perfect for muscles that have become tense and taut after a competitive game – especially if, like me at the Oitavos, you've lost.

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