

GOLF ON THE COTE D'AZURE: SUMMER 2011

Reviews of ;

The Old Course Cannes, Mandelieu

Golf de Barbaroux, Brignoles

Golf de Sainte-Maxime

Welcome to The Old Course Cannes Mandelieu, where old school meets new school. Click on the website and you'll be greeted with the pulsating sound of Moby's Porcelain; get to the track and you'll be greeted by the delightful Fleur who'll sort you out and get you on this historic course in no time at all.

The club is celebrating its 120th anniversary this year, which is a damn fine reason to get the clubs packed and head on down to see what's occurring on the Cote D'Azur for golfers. We're going to play three courses in the area, and sample the general delights of the region.

Golf has been played in Cannes Mandelieu since 1891, which was the year that His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Michael Aleksandrovich of Russia – or Mike for short- founded the course. It's the third oldest course in France, and was inspired by his visit to St Andrews as a 12 year old. He came to a sad end as he was murdered in 1918 on the orders of Lenin, together with his English valet, which proves beyond doubt what we had suspected all along; Lenin wasn't a golfer.

Cannes Mandeleau is a little charmer and packed full of its own idiosyncrasies. How many golf courses do you know that start with a par 4, followed by two Par 3's? Weird and actually a bit of a pain as it makes for a slow start. But you've got to be forgiving, as to get to the fourth you're in for a really unique golfing treat, which involves being ferried over the river La Saigne on a chain-boat.

Then you're properly into the course, which is characterized by magnificent ancient Parasol pine trees, which provide fantastic shade in the heat of the day, and present their own challenges. Many a ball has been lost by being sucked into these high, flat tree tops. So beware at the fifth. If you try and cut off the dog-leg you may never see your ball again. In autumn they also shed their pine needles by the bucket load, so putting can be a bit of a challenge unless you bring your own pine needle blower with you.

This is a course not only of boats but also of planes, trains, and automobiles. The planes are executive jets punching their way into the stratosphere from nearby Cannes Airport. The trains are the sleek TGV's which quietly ghost by on the line which bisects the course. And the cars can be found – and avoided- when you cross a busy main road to attempt your two crossings of the river La Saigne.

Once you've played the major section of the course, you'll make your way under a train bridge to play a three hole stretch which is right by the beach, and where you'll get an alluring glimpse of the Mediterranean. Then it's back over the river again to play the final holes before diving into the bar for some elegant refreshment.

The course started out as 9 holes, but was expanded to 18 in the 1930's by that greatest of golf course designers, Harry Colt, so this is a course with a golf bag full of history and heritage. For me the signature hole has to be the 8th, which is a little beauty and captures the dominant Parasol pines at their absolute best.

Day two and it's off to Brignoles, an hour's drive from Cannes down the A8 – the backbone of the Cote D'Azur. Its home to a Pete and P.B Dye designed course, which they created back in 1989, so it's a youngster in comparison with The Old Course in Cannes.

We drive through vineyard after vineyard, and climb a long hill to arrive at the clubhouse. And then the magic really begins. The first is a statement of intent – you're high on a hill and confronted with water to the left and a snaky long shallow bunker. Oh, and there's a small vineyard to avoid for good measure. So hitting the narrow fairway is a must, unless you like hitting long-iron bunker shots.

The first five holes will either scare the living day lights out of you, or make you. This is rock 'n roll golf, and Pete Dye at his most creative and bonkers.

The third is one you really have to watch out for. A Par 5 of 411meters off the yellows, it starts with a downhill blind drive. You've got to keep it on the fairway as there's trouble on the right and left, but the problem is you haven't a clue as to what you are really confronting. Only when you get to your ball will you see what you are really dealing with – a fairway that runs off into a massive downhill slope where the hole lies what must be over 100 feet below. This is spectacular stuff!

The course just doesn't let up over the front nine, as you play your way along the crest of a very steep hill. The navigation is tricky if you are playing the course for the first time – on the 5th we just had no idea where the fairway went – it actually veers off to the right onto a raised plateau. You really need a 3D stroke saver for this place. Now there's an idea!

It starts to calm down a bit on the back nine, as the landscape flattens out. But don't for a moment think that Pete and P.B Dye are about to make life easy for you. The 11th is a classic risk and reward hole which requires a good drive over a lake to a narrow ribbon of fairway which is shored up by his trademark railway sleepers. You can bite off as much or as little as you want, but there is no dry option.

The 13th looks straightforward but has a few tricks up its sleeves to keep you on your toes; a massive ribbon bunker on the left, and then some great distance disguise as the fairway dips down before the green and conceals some additional twenty meters from the eye.

The 14th is a full on Dye charmer: a short, 258 meter Par 4 dog-leg right, which is heavily guarded with a massive bunker to the right, and then a series of his infamous small pot hole bunkers.

There's plenty of water on the back nine, especially on the 17th where you have to navigate your way round three separate stretches of water, including one that guards the green itself. The 18th is unusually a par 3, albeit a longish one at 181 meters. It's the only slight let down on what is otherwise an exhilarating and fascinating course, which will leave you wanting more.

Day three and we are off to play Golf De St Maxime. We've had our cards marked about this course, and its fantastic views over the Gulf of St Tropez and we are not disappointed – not in the least. We are also treated to a spectacular air show as we play, with everything from formation fighter jets to death-defying loop-the-loop merchants, who seem to take great delight in cutting their engines in mid dive, only to restart them at the last moment. Why can't they just be normal, and play golf on a Sunday afternoon? And all the excitement can interfere with your putting!

The course winds its way downhill towards the village of St Maxime, and then begins its long ascent to its summit on the 16th with its spectacular 360 degree views of the Gulf of St Tropez and the distant Maures and Esterel massifs. But there's more to the course than just fine views; there's some great golf holes here too. The par 160 metre 3 7th requires a good mid-iron from a very elevated tee box to get you down and avoiding a lake on the left hand side, while the 8th uses this same lake to hinder your progress to an elevated green which is cut into a sheer rock face.

The signature hole has to be the Par 5 11, which again sees you driving off from the top of the hill to a distant, elevated green, while making sure you miss a tall pine tree which overshadows your second shot. And the view is to Pete Dye for with the whole Gulf of St Tropez laid out before you.

The 17th is another spectacular Par 3, which sees you teeing off a hundred feet up from a distant, heavily bunkered green. The green is in surprisingly good condition despite having to cope with balls raining in on it from on high.

The course offers you a great journey into the hills of St Maxime, and you will be glad that you have to take a buggy, unless you are a mountain goat. But even they might have second thoughts if they were also trying to get some golf played.

Three days, and three courses, but we feel that we've only just scratched the surface of this region which also serves up some of the best weather a golfer can dream of. Add it to the list!

ENDS: 1531 Words.