

Andalucia's pioneering golf course

The greens are greener in Andalucia

**- a golf course has injected new life into an arid landscape
without soaking up precious water resources -**

By Leonard Doyle

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Looking out over the wide expanse of the fertile Laguna de La Janda from an elevated third tee in the heart of Andalucia, I am wondering where my ball has gone. The scene could not be more idyllic. It is early morning and the spanking new golf course in the little-known town of Benalup is empty save for myself and a chorus of birds. I am alone because my putative playing partner, 16-year-old daughter Katherine, refused all entreaties to join me for an early pre-breakfast round.

The fairways are perfect, the greens as fast as billiard tables and there is no one around to witness my hit-and-miss efforts.

Besides my erratic golf swing, all is not quite right with the picture unfolding before me, Arcadian though it is. And as I retrieve my sliced golf ball from behind a prickly pear cactus, I am conscious that golf, especially when played on a resort in Spain, is an activity frowned upon by many right-thinking people.

"Golf is a good walk spoiled," Mark Twain famously said, and Winston Churchill opined that it "is a game whose aim is to hit a very small ball into an even smaller hole, with weapons singularly ill-designed for the purpose".

But lots of people seem to reserve a special contempt for those who golf in Spain. One London colleague told me she considers golfing holidays as only marginally behind taking a cruise, in her pecking order of vacations from hell. Another announced that to golf in Spain was a worse crime than attending a bullfight. If bullfighting is morally indefensible, then playing golf on courses that squander precious water resources in order to keep greens and fairways in pristine condition is an abomination. Or so the logic goes.

In truth, the arguments over water use in Andalucia have been going on for more than 1,000 years. In 711 the Moors crossed over from North Africa to colonise the land they lovingly called al-Andalus. They particularly appreciated the legacy of irrigation channels left by the Romans that brought water from the often snow-capped mountains to the parched towns and fields. And while the rest of Europe was living in the Dark Ages, Seville was fully plumbed, with drinking water in a majority of houses.

The Romans introduced water wheels and mule-driven pumps to improve the flow, and dams to increase supply. They also built a network of irrigation channels called "acequias" which made the desert bloom. And there remains to this day a special court to manage the water resources, with detailed administrative records held in the courtyard of Valencia cathedral. It still meets every Friday, with powers to order blocked water channels to be opened to settle water disputes between farmers. The Moors brought agricultural technology and such crops as rice, cotton, sugar cane and pomegranates with them from across the Middle East. To this day the pomegranate is the symbol of Granada.

But the Moors also husbanded water with the sort of care you would expect from a Bedouin people who migrated from the Arabian peninsula. In contrast, modern-day Europeans squander it like alcoholics at a wake.

Here in the valley stretched out beneath my feet, the European Union is inexplicably subsidising wealthy landowners to flood the fields with water from the Barbate river so that they can grow rice. This is odd because the rice they produce is second rate in comparison to that produced in Asia, and the deliberate flooding of the plain wastes vast amounts of water. It also brings millions of mosquitoes which harass villagers and visitors in equal measure. To keep them in check, crop dusters have to spray thousands of gallons of insecticide over the valley all summer long.

"We think it is totally ridiculous," Benalup's mayor, Francisco "Paco" Cabeñas, tells me. "Growing rice is not a tradition here and how can the EU justify subsidising a crop that produces a tiny amount of employment, uses lots of water and brings the nuisance of mosquitoes to our town?"

"We want to end it right away," adds Paco, who has been a Socialist mayor of Benalup for 23 years and is now president of the regional council. *

But the power of Andalucia's landowning families is not to be underestimated. The man growing rice in the flooded plain below is said by Paco to be a former Spanish minister of agriculture, and scion of the Domecq family. Having sold the famous sherry business, he has found a heavily subsidised niche that consumes vast amounts of water.

Some 500 years after the Moors were expelled from Andalucia, arguments over water use continue to rage. Environmentalists say that 42 per cent of Spain could become desert because of pressure from inappropriate farming and out-of-control holiday villa developments, each one with its own signature golf course.

And of course Spain is especially vulnerable to climate change. Average summer temperatures in the country are projected to rise by as much as 7C, rainfall could hit all-time lows and sea levels rise by as much as one metre in the last third of this century. The

University of Castilla La Mancha predicts that whole beaches will disappear, especially the Ebro delta, Llobregat, Manga del Mar Menor and the coastal Doñana national park.

Which brings us back to golf and my justification for playing the game in the midst of such environmental doom-mongering.

The answer here in the interior of Andalucia, about halfway between Jerez and Europe's playground of Marbella, is that a previously unremarkable town is challenging perceptions about the supposed damage that golf courses do to the environment.

White-painted Benalup, bears its original Arabic name from a time when it was a way station on the Moorish military road from Medina Sidonia to Gibraltar. A quiet revolution is taking place with the potential to mitigate some of the worst effects of global warming or desertification wherever there are shortages of water.

Here is a golf course built on scrub land that does not require constant irrigation with fresh water. Thanks to an extraordinary polymer which is mixed with the soil to help it retain water and nutrients, the course is perennially green. The result is a verdant oasis, into which more than 900 native olive trees, the Acebuche or Olia Europe, and cork oaks (*Quercus suber*) have been transplanted after they were successfully rescued from a major motorway project which was blasting a highway down the middle of Andalucia.

Developed by a Belgian University professor, Willem Van Cotthem, at the University of Ghent to aid reforestation in arid regions of Africa, the product is known as TerraCottem.

Not only is it rolling back desertification in arid parts of Africa but it also helps keep premier league football grounds (Chelsea, Liverpool, Nottingham Forest to name a few) in good shape and even keeps roundabouts and other public spaces looking green.

The polymer in TerraCottem expands by soaking up water, like the granules inside a baby's disposable nappy. They then slowly release the moisture together with nutrients, ensuring a plant's survival. This allows the microscopic root hairs to grow and ensures that plants and trees survive prolonged periods of drought.

Carol Devos, who is a driving force behind the green revolution in Benalup, shows me a sample of the product which she says turned a barren patch of land into an eye-pleasing 18-hole course complete with transplanted and now thriving, ancient olive and oak trees.

"We had to do it all during the summer," she says, "because that is when the trees were being uprooted for the motorway. There was no time to prepare the root-balls and these enormous trees had to be taken out of the hills by trucks pulled by bulldozers. "But with the soil conditioner we were able to ensure a 90 per cent plus survival rate."

Now the sustainable approach is causing ripples of interest in the most staid golfing establishments of the Costa which are suddenly being forced by law to use recycled water.

The success of Benalup's golf course and the five-star luxury hotel that goes along with it is bringing tourists to Benalup for the first time. It has created an economic boom all of its own. Mayor Paco explains to me that the town's workforce, the majority construction workers, used to commute to the Costa every Monday, living in crowded hostels only to return at the

weekend. Now the town itself is thriving, with new businesses opening every week and Spaniards treating it as a destination from which to explore inland Andalucia.

I put my clubs away and wait in the bar for my daughter to arrive for lunch. When Katherine finally joins me it is for jamon and melon rather than a round of golf, in one of the resort's delightful restaurants. Then there are various treatments which have been pre-booked in its luxurious spa. For a while it looks like my attempts to impart an appreciation of the ancient Scottish game are doomed to failure.

But eventually we do set off round the course using an electric buggy. It is all delightfully placid, thanks to the wide gaps between starting times. From practically every hole there are views across the valley to Los Alcornales National Park. And above all there is no pressure, none of the armies of Home Counties golfers that blight so many Spanish courses. And after some decent shots we are beginning to enjoy ourselves. By the day's end Katherine is still telling me how she finds golf "boring", but at the same time I see her beaming with joy whenever she connects with the ball to send it flying down the middle of the fairway. She is also showing an unnerving knack of holing 15ft putts. Beginner's luck I tell myself.

Careful conservation means that endangered species such as the Spanish imperial eagle can occasionally be spotted. There are only 210 pairs of this magnificent bird left in the world and their return has brought some hope to the region around the Doñana at a time when the ecosystem is increasingly fragile.

Only a short distance from Benalup are some of the most extraordinary prehistoric caves in Europe. One at Tajor de las Figuras contains images that are believed to be 15,000 years old, drawn by people of the Solutrean culture. There are some 157 such astonishing cave paintings in the area, although many have been damaged by vandals.

A little further on are the ruins of the monastery of El Cuervo, which Michael Jacobs, the noted author on Spain, describes as "one of the most moving sites in all of Andalucia".

After a delightful wooded walk of nearly an hour you arrive at a steep path laid by monks. They began building it in 1717, using sandstone quarried from the Sierra Blanquilla. An Italian carpenter was employed for the woodwork and statuary, but he never completed his work, dying in Cadiz in 1775 in the tidal wave caused by the Lisbon earthquake. Today, cattle munch grass in the ruins of the church, and while the dome of the church has collapsed, a tree has sprouted in the middle.

One of Andalucia's great attractions is its wildlife, and it is the only place in Europe where such birds as the black-shouldered kite, red-necked nightjars and azure-winged magpies still thrive. The wetlands of the Doñana are arguably Europe's finest, and in the mountains there are more rare bird communities including harrier and eagles - all of them threatened by the twin dangers of climate change and over-development.

As Benalup's experiment in protecting the environment, while encouraging tourism, is showing, the more people who come to appreciate the extraordinary natural wildlife of Andalucia, the easier it is to win the argument for protection and conservation.

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

GETTING THERE

Rail Europe (08708 371 371; www.raileurope.co.uk) offers services to Seville from London Waterloo and Ashford via Paris and Madrid. By air,, the nearest airport to Benalup-Casas Viejas is Jerez de la Frontera, which is served by Ryanair (0871 246 0000; www.ryanair.com) from Stansted. Seville, about 145km from Benalup, is served by Ryanair from Liverpool and Stansted, by Iberia (0870 609 0500; www.iberia.com) from Heathrow and by GB Airways on behalf of BA (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) from Gatwick.

STAYING THERE

Benalup Golf Club and Fairplay Golf Hotel, Calle La Torre, Benalup-Casas Viejas, Cadiz (00 34 956 42 49 28; www.benalupgolf.com). Suites start at €471 (£336). Golf course green fees start at €60 (£43) for nine holes.

VISITING THERE

Alcornocales Natural Park (00 34 956 679 161; www.alcornocales.org, Spanish only).

FURTHER INFORMATION

Andalucia tourism: 00 34 95 422 1404; www.andalucia.org

Spanish Tourist Board: 08459 400180; www.tourspain.co.uk