

# FRONT 9 TRAVEL

Bespoke Luxury Golf Experiences

ISSUE ONE AUTUMN 2020

## South Africa - to travel to or journey through?

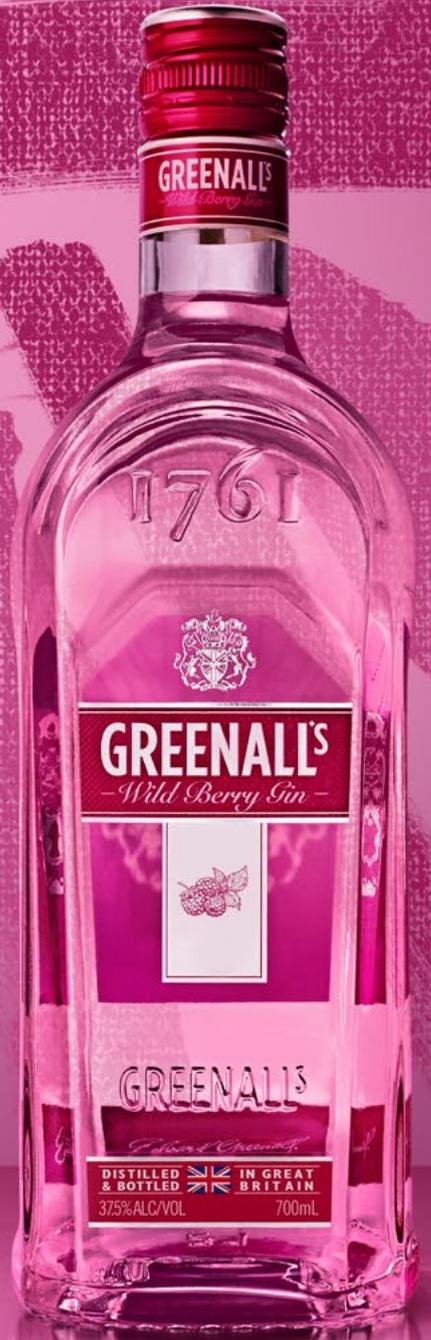
Including Luscious La Finca & Captivating Canouan

Inspiration from great golf destinations and travel writers

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## EDITORS LETTER AUTUMN 2020

### 'We're in this together'

Welcome to the very first issue of Front 9 Travel's magazine and my Editors letter with the theme that 'We're in this together' – we hope our collection of features will bring you a little bit of escapism and light relief, and that's the sentiment and spirit we encourage you to bring with you when you read about the inspiring places and unique golfing destinations and travel experiences we can create for you. We know that, as the dark nights close in upon us all and the restrictions of another lockdown, planning a special trip can seem frustratingly out of reach, but times will change. So defer, don't drop the plans and support our travel industry to secure a future for it! Our knowledgeable and experienced travel professionals have searched out the very best there is to offer amongst the world's 5 star luxury golf and travel destinations, and will continue to do so to bring to you new and exciting offerings, so let our features in this, our first issue, and those future issues still to come, inspire you and let us help you create a bespoke golfing holiday experience, and remember "There is nothing like a dream to create the future." Victor Hugo



Above Image:  
Table Mountain, South Africa

Front cover image: Leopard  
Creek Country Club,  
Mpumalanga, South Africa

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# South Africa – to travel to or journey through?

written by Simon Lacey

I first visited South Africa some twenty five years ago and instantly fell in love with the country and its people, and knew I had to go back. And have done so – many times, exploring more widely every time.



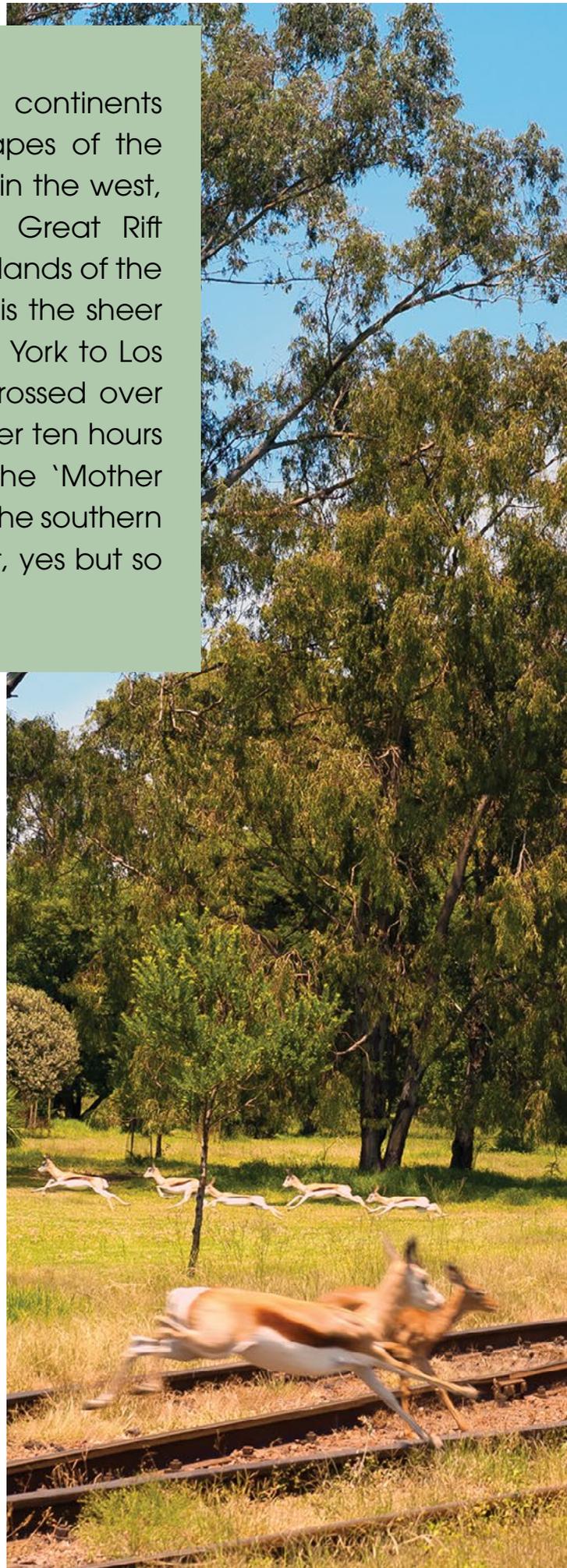
Outeniqua Golf Course, South Africa



Africa is one of, if not the most diverse continents on the planet, from the desert landscapes of the north, the rainforests of the Congo Basin in the west, the mountains and volcanoes of the Great Rift Valley in the east and the savannah grasslands of the south. But what surprises many travellers is the sheer size of the place – you can fly from New York to Los Angeles in about six hours but having crossed over Gibraltar from the UK you still have another ten hours to go before you land in Cape Town; the ‘Mother City’ of South Africa. And that’s not quite the southern most tip of the continent! It’s a long flight, yes but so well worth the journey.

South Africa is at the southernmost tip of the continent – as the name suggests(!), Otherwise known as the Rainbow Nation, it’s about four times the size of the UK and encompasses such a variety of landscapes that it is rightly become known as ‘the world in one country’. So where to start? At the bottom seems as logical place as any.

The Cape Provinces encompass Cape Town on the Atlantic Coast and stretches along the very bottom of the country crossing into the Indian Ocean along the way. It is the most visited part of South Africa and for very good reasons. Amongst its attractions are Cape Town itself, where cultures mix and thrive, the Cape Wine-lands of Franschhoek, Stellenbosch and Paarl, the most dazzling array of flora in the country, the incredible marine life from penguins to orca’s and Great White sharks, the vast deserts of the Karoo, the stunning Tsitsikamma Forest and lastly some of the most scenic and challenging golf courses in the country – Pearl Valley, Pinnacle Point and The Links at Fancourt amongst them.





Exploring South Africa  
on Rovos Rail



Penguins at Boulders Beach,  
Simon's Town, Cape Town

Continuing north up the Indian Ocean coast you enter one of the most beautiful provinces in South Africa, KwaZulu Natal – the ‘place of the Zulus’. KZN has everything that the Cape Provinces have bar the winelands – although that is changing – but makes up for that loss by adding some of the most evocative locations in South African history in a land too often fought over; Ladysmith, Mafeking and Rorke’s Drift amongst them. The likes of Mahatma Gandhi, King Shaka of the Zulus, Lord Kitchener and Winston Churchill forged history here. KZN is sandwiched between the dramatic Drakensberg Escarpment, which leads up to the highest kingdom in the world, Lesotho, and the wild beaches of the Indian Ocean. In between sits the most fertile farmland in Africa, the Midlands. The golf courses of KZN largely sit along the coastline either side of the port of Durban such as Durban Country Club and Princes Grant but there are some gems inland such as Champagne Sport, Cathedral Peak and Cotswold Downs.

The focus thus far has been on the most visited provinces but the six others each have their own ‘pulls’ and some huge ones at that.

Mpumalanga, sits on the border with the newly named Eswatini – Swaziland as was, and Mozambique and is home to the Kruger National Park, the largest wildlife park in South Africa. About the same size as Wales, the park is a magnet for locals and overseas visitors seeking for a slice of wilderness.... just not too wild. The so called Big 5 can be found here as does the highest ranked golf course in the country; Leopard Creek. The 18th was designed by someone with a wicked, perhaps warped, sense of humour.

Head to the far north of South Africa and you enter the province of Limpopo (love that name) which borders Zimbabwe and Botswana and is a great place for a malarial free safari - as are the reserves in the Eastern Cape - in one of its private game reserves; Waterberg National

Park being the best known. Golfers can find a challenge at Legend Golf and Safari Resort. The famous 19th will most certainly challenge you – but not if you get airsick!

Sun City is known the world over and nestles in the semi-desert North-West Province on the edge of the Pilanesberg National Park and is a year round playground for locals and international visitors alike. Considered by some to be a little 'commercial' it nonetheless hosts two incredible golf courses in The Lost City GC and The Gary Player Country Club. Teeing off with a mating herd of elephants looking on is quite an experience. For a quieter safari experience head to Madikwe Game Reserve on the Botswana border, it's also malarial free.

To the south is Gauteng (pronounced 'how teng') where Johannesburg and the country's capital Pretoria both sit and have a number of well rated golf courses such as Royal Johannesburg & Kensington and Glendower, both well worth playing before going 'bush'.

This journey around South Africa ends with a road trip from Gauteng through the Free State, home of the Boers and the birthplace to so many superb Springbok rugby players and follows the N1 through the Northern Cape to Cape Town. It's almost 900 miles if you go the direct route but stop off at Bloemfontein and the Big Hole in Kimberley en-route and, if the season is right, swing by Namaqualand for the most incredible sight as the desert bursts into flower. You will then have experienced the real South Africa and seen 'the world in one country'.



An alternative, if you're up for a real challenge, then go to Pearl Valley, a Jack Nicklaus Signature Course close to the wine town of Franschhoek, an easy 40 minute drive from Somerset West. There's loads of water and well placed bunkers, which can be found far too easily. Again try for an early tee-off and then pop along to 'La Petite Ferme' for lunch on the Franschhoek Pass road; the food is superb, the wine is made on site and the setting is just incredible with the whole of the Franschhoek Valley laid out below you.

If this is your first visit to South Africa, I'll wager that you'll be back.



Pearl Valley, Jack Nicklaus Golf Course,  
Paarl, South Africa



# Luscious La Finca Resort

written by Carolyn Scott



There is a scene in the classic movie 'The Gladiator' where Maximus (Russell Crowe) approaches his Spanish Finca and gallops through a vision of burnished and ombre coloured fields lined with rows of cypress trees. I'm reminded of this emotive landscape when I sit for the first time in the cool breezy terrace at the La Finca Golf Resort's impressive club house looking out over the arid burnt sienna colours of the farmland where way in the distance tree lined avenues sit against the horizon. In the low valley nestles the La Finca golf course, an oasis of lush verdant green.



The Hotel, low level and of chic modern design, is softened by beautiful 'Italianate' style gardens surrounding a sophisticated pool area complete with terrace bar. All very grown up and calming, no screaming kids allowed here!

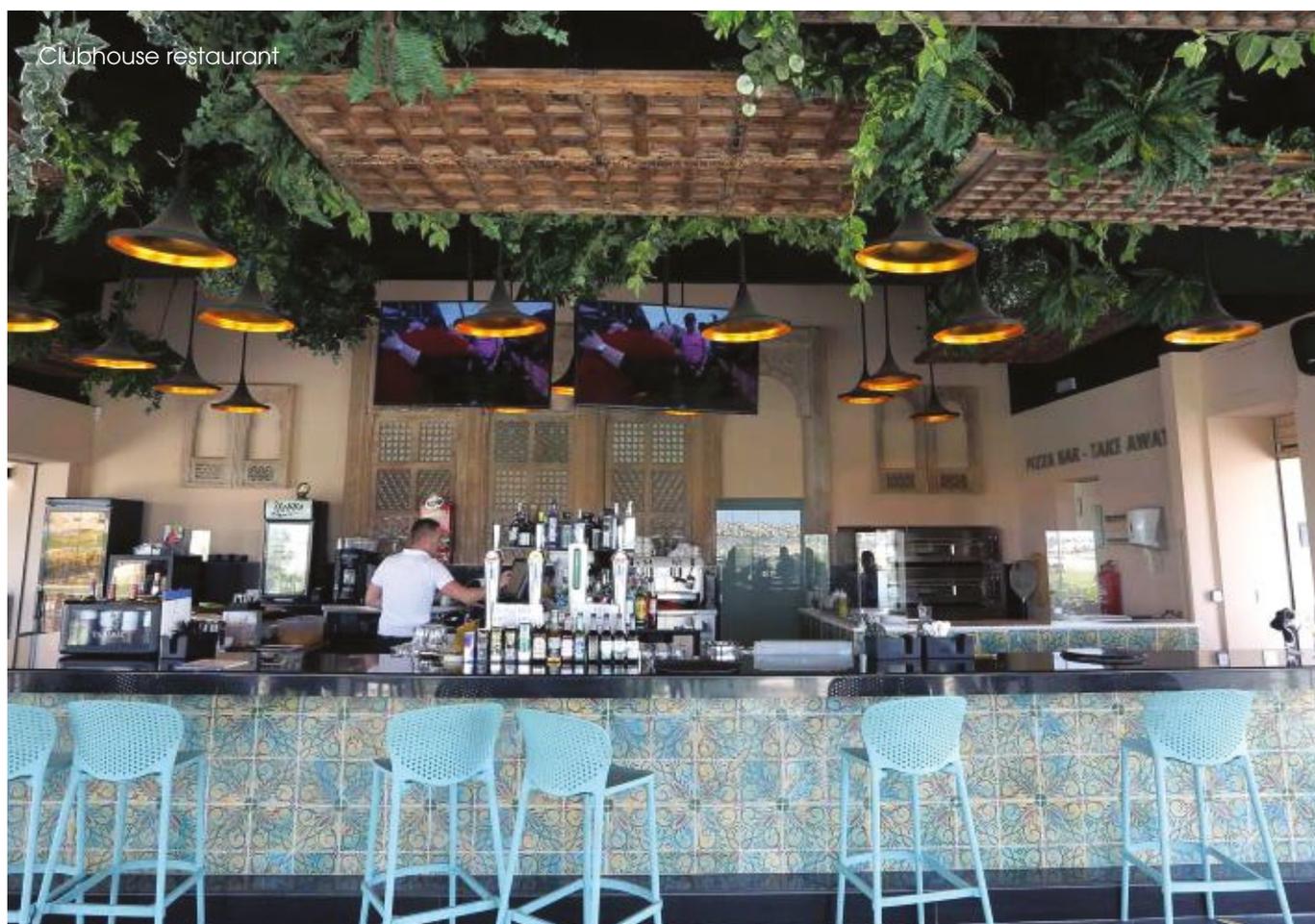
Many modern hotels can feel their age, but whilst it might be ten years since La Finca Hotel first opened its doors, the hotel still feels fresh. This year a significant renovation exercise has been undertaken with half the rooms and restaurants getting a makeover. The result is modern chic and contemporary.

## Accommodation and Dining

We stayed in a comfortable Deluxe room with impressive views across the gardens, pool and far distant hills beyond – some fantastic sunrises! The rooms are very modern in design, well equipped with coffee and tea making facilities. A luxurious and contemporary bathroom with one of the best showers I have used!!

Dining options during my visit were somewhat limited, a temporary situation due to Covid-19. We had a fairly standard breakfast in the buffet area but with very attentive staff. Dinner was in the 'Hub', an open plan homage to minimalism, with a cocktail bar and dining area all currently located on the terrace outside. The food was excellent a fresh fusion of modern and traditional Spanish dishes. In September a new restaurant will open to increase the choice in the hotel. 'Citrus Experience' this will offer traditional Spanish cuisine with a contemporary twist served up in an ultra-modern all white interior space.

The star of the show, whilst the new restaurants are being completed, is the La Finca Golf clubhouse, a clean contemporary building, modern in style but with design features that introduce a touch of on trend antique chic. (when you look up, the ceiling is full of horizontal hung old Spanish doors). The view is fantastic, in the distance a quintessential Spanish vista of brown and green farmland





stretching for miles with La Finca golf course in the foreground running through the valley. The position of the clubhouse up high above the course makes it cool and inviting to lunch there. The menu presented simple good quality local produce and the service quick and organised. Adjacent to the clubhouse is a new building of traditional style with a mix of modern and old interiors. This building will have a high end Spanish and Paella restaurant called Misto and

function space and an impressive Bodega. All planned to be open by October 2020. Below and adjacent to the pro shop will be a state of the art gym and high performance sports facility.

And finally, in this impressive renewal project a contemporary jazzy Mexican/Italian restaurant right next to the first tee opened at the end of August. Just the place to watch the action!

## Golf

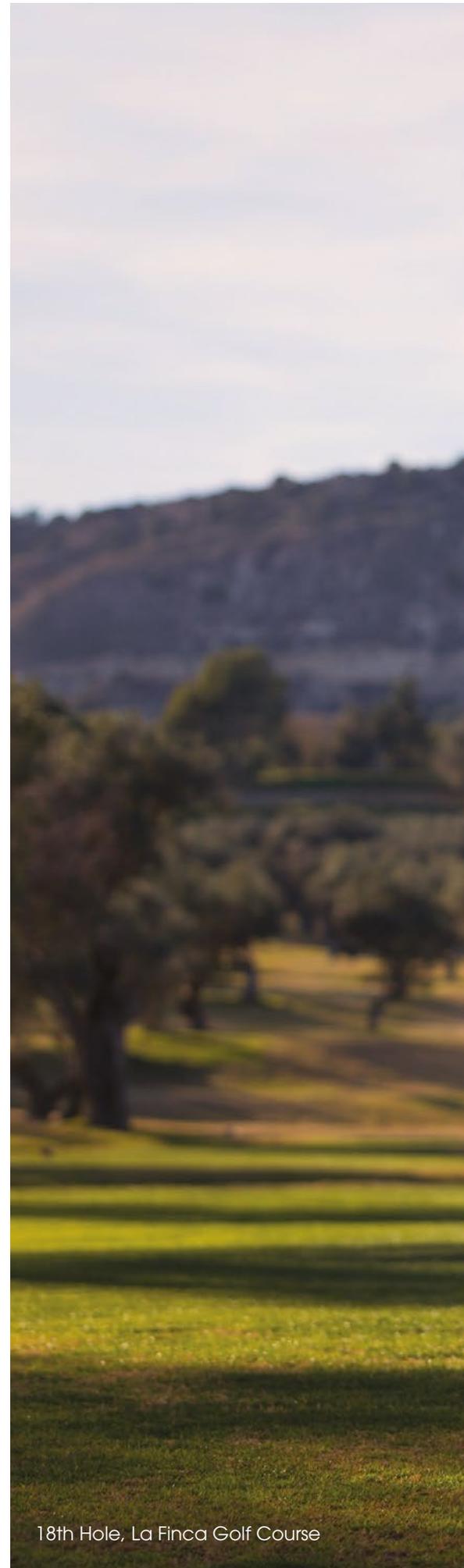
On-site is La Finca, one of three courses owned and managed by La Finca Resort, Las Ramblas and Villamartin being also part of the stable, whilst not on the same estate they form a cohesive offering for visitors to the Hotel. Villamartin, which opened in 1972, is the most established and remains a members club as well as open to visitors, Las Ramblas opened in 1991 and La Finca opened in 2002.

La Finca – To reiterate - the clubhouse at La Finca is impressive. Contemporary and chic with amazing views over the course and the distant landscape beyond. I don't think I have ever had such an impressive view of a whole golf course. The clubhouse terrace bar and restaurant is well positioned on the top of the clubhouse and there was a lovely cooling breeze as we lunched on freshly prepared salads, pre-game. The clubhouse staff were efficient and helpful and fortified and ready for golf we were assigned a buggy with GPS and were ready to start our round.

Designed in 2002 by Pepe Gancedo, former Spanish amateur champion, often referred to as the 'Picasso of Golf', with his ability to create works of art in his course design, whilst also delivering a sporting challenge, and indeed, La Finca is a feast for the eye from every angle.

Located in a lush shallow valley, it is a green oasis amongst an arid agricultural backdrop with stark stony terrain on the small hill range in the distance (although is apparently a very fertile and productive agricultural area for Spain). From many holes there are stunning views over the plains and to the horizon. Reed beds and streams meander alongside you into formidable lakes all creating a beautiful backdrop for birds and wildlife, whilst the fairways are lined with olive and palm trees.

The course is being constantly upgraded by the current owners, who are keen golfers themselves, to ensure well-maintained fairways, smart bunkers, excellent greens, wide fairways, kind rough and consistent greens, albeit a little slow for me. The wide fairways lull one into a false hope that this will be an easy course but well placed and numerous bunkers, together with undulating ground and steep slopes create a challenge not too crushing but enough to make one want to take on the course again.



18th Hole, La Finca Golf Course





Las Ramblas Golf Course - 4th hole

So, to the first tee, elevated to give a bird's eye view of the first fairway, it creates an inviting beginning to the round. I have to say that many of the holes have a degree of similarity, which is not to say not enjoyable but wide fairways are the norm with strategically placed bunkers being the challenge. Unusually the two most difficult holes are the 17th and 18th (stroke index 1 and 2), I was just noting that there had not been a 'freak out' hole until we faced the Par 4, 17th. A whopping 280 yard carry of water from the Men's tee box to the fairway, to what then looked like a handkerchief of a green. The only other option a narrow route to the right, where the risk of water is if you overshoot, and if you take that route there is a green side bunker to contend with!! The 18th is then a long beautiful par 5 up toward to the clubhouse, challenging more for its length and incline rather than hazards, albeit a stream splits the fairway in two.

An enjoyable course to play – if one was being really picky you would say it is a 'resort' course – wide fairways and easy rough – but the bunkers seemed to capture many good balls

and the wide fairways can lead to trouble as it undulates in all directions. I didn't play my best golf so feel there is still a challenge there for me and would definitely like to play again.

Las Ramblas and Villamartin are a 20 to 30 minute drive from the resort either under your own steam as we did or the hotel provides a complimentary minibus. Unfortunately due to our time restrictions we didn't have time to play Villamartin but we did have the pleasure of playing Las Ramblas, where the clubhouse offers great views of the golf course and driving range.

Las Ramblas - The reviews of Las Ramblas suggested that the course was going to be an interesting challenge with lots of recommendations to stock up on balls before starting the round!

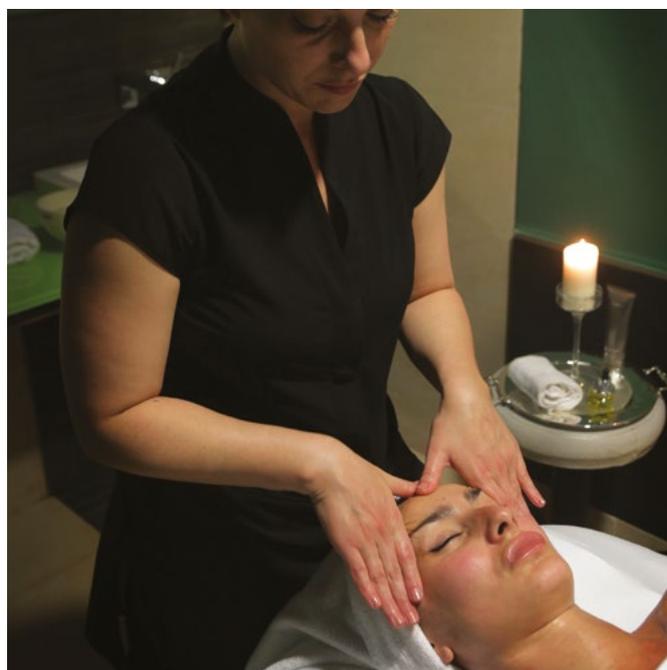
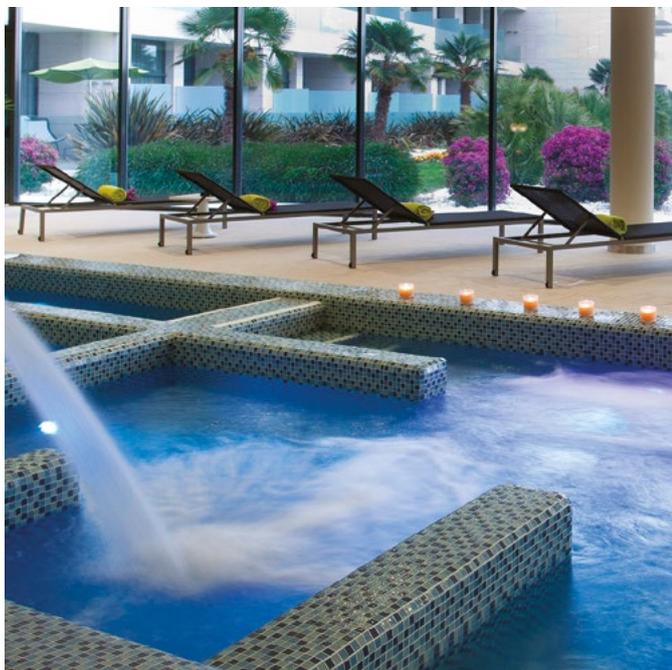
Indeed, Las Ramblas is quite an unusual course and long hitters might decide to leave their driver at home, also designed by Pepe Gancedo, it is laid out over very steep dramatic terrain surrounded by water, and

densely populated with pine trees, thankfully providing shade as well as hazards! The reviews suggested the course to be very tight with blind holes; sharp doglegs and long carry's over ravines and that one should have low expectations of scoring well.

So to our round - we were asked to begin on 10th tee, a short par 3 that requires the accuracy of 'passing a camel through the eye of a needle', on the right side of the green a sharp drop to a ravine and the left a line of pine trees. A wobbly start that set the tone for the next few holes, with a second challenging par 3 at the 12th hole, which required carrying the total distance to a raised green, and then a third par 3 at the 14th requiring exacting calculation of distance or your ball was gone. The longer holes are full of interest and

danger and hitting the right distance is the key to understanding how to play this course, its very interesting and challenging but equally very enjoyable. The front 9 are a little more forgiving except perhaps the 6th and the 7th. The 6th requires pinpoint accuracy to hit the green and avoid the gorge on the right whilst the 7th is a right angle dogleg over a ravine, which requires carry all the way. Despite the challenge of this course we both played quite well. This course is a thinkers course and suits those with shorter games who are used to plotting their way round, my playing partner is a long hitter and on the day his accuracy was on game and as a consequence he really enjoyed the challenge of choosing how to play his longer clubs - however be warned, if you are a long hitters with less accuracy then leave the woods in the bag!

## Other Facilities

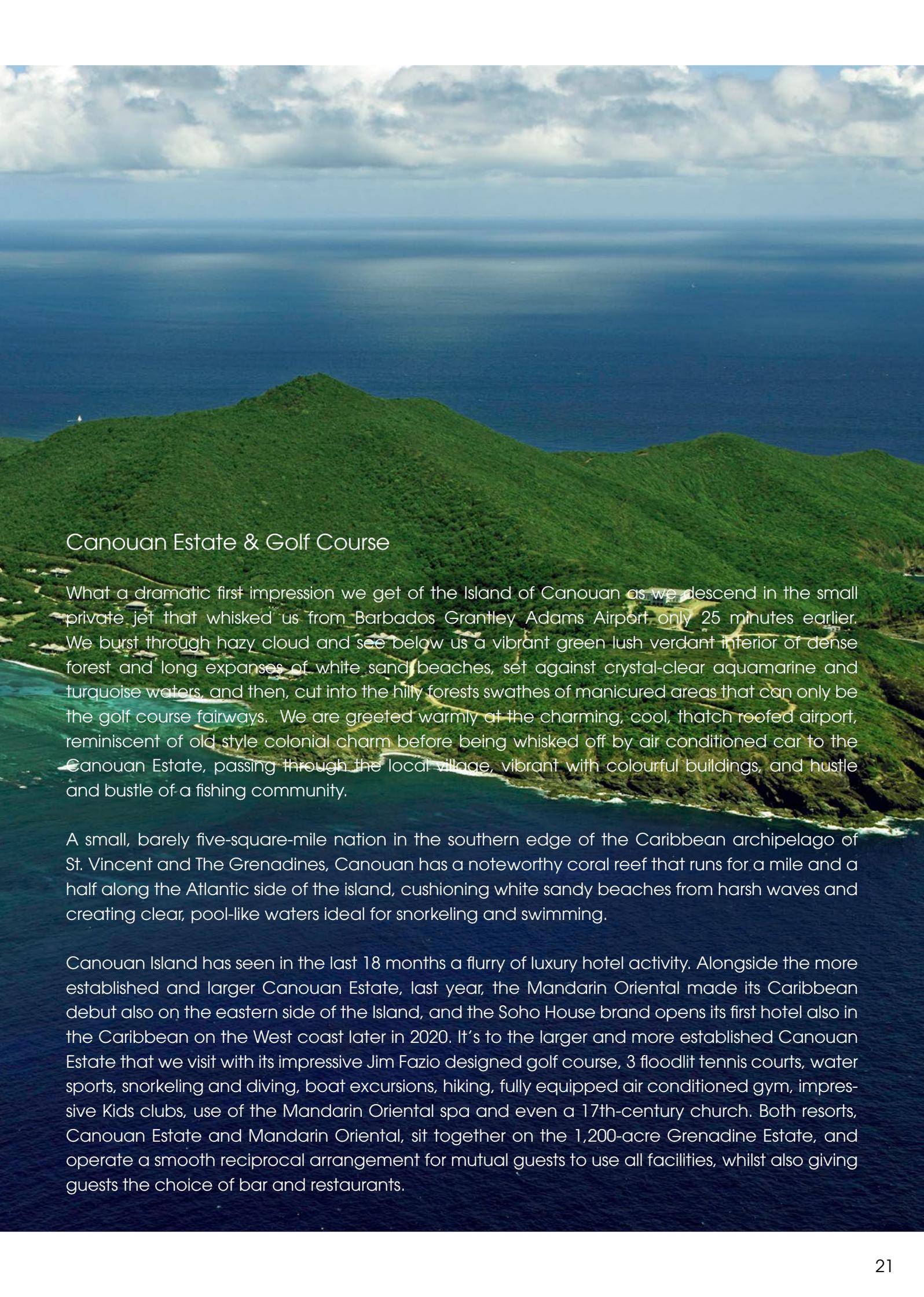


My short trip didn't allow time for a visit to the Spa, but from a quick tour it was clear that this is of the highest standard. Impressed to note that some thought had been given to its location and the indoor pool area had fabulous views to the gardens beyond rather than being located in the basement, as so many spas seem to be. A full range of treatments are available, featuring the excellent Spanish range Natura Bisse. There is also a well-equipped gym, tennis courts and of course golf practice area.

# Captivating Canouan

written by Carolyn Scott





## Canouan Estate & Golf Course

What a dramatic first impression we get of the Island of Canouan as we descend in the small private jet that whisked us from Barbados Grantley Adams Airport only 25 minutes earlier. We burst through hazy cloud and see below us a vibrant green lush verdant interior of dense forest and long expanses of white sand beaches, set against crystal-clear aquamarine and turquoise waters, and then, cut into the hilly forests swathes of manicured areas that can only be the golf course fairways. We are greeted warmly at the charming, cool, thatch roofed airport, reminiscent of old style colonial charm before being whisked off by air conditioned car to the Canouan Estate, passing through the local village, vibrant with colourful buildings, and hustle and bustle of a fishing community.

A small, barely five-square-mile nation in the southern edge of the Caribbean archipelago of St. Vincent and The Grenadines, Canouan has a noteworthy coral reef that runs for a mile and a half along the Atlantic side of the island, cushioning white sandy beaches from harsh waves and creating clear, pool-like waters ideal for snorkeling and swimming.

Canouan Island has seen in the last 18 months a flurry of luxury hotel activity. Alongside the more established and larger Canouan Estate, last year, the Mandarin Oriental made its Caribbean debut also on the eastern side of the Island, and the Soho House brand opens its first hotel also in the Caribbean on the West coast later in 2020. It's to the larger and more established Canouan Estate that we visit with its impressive Jim Fazio designed golf course, 3 floodlit tennis courts, water sports, snorkeling and diving, boat excursions, hiking, fully equipped air conditioned gym, impressive Kids clubs, use of the Mandarin Oriental spa and even a 17th-century church. Both resorts, Canouan Estate and Mandarin Oriental, sit together on the 1,200-acre Grenadine Estate, and operate a smooth reciprocal arrangement for mutual guests to use all facilities, whilst also giving guests the choice of bar and restaurants.

## Accommodation and Dining

After a short airport transfer to the resort, about 15 minutes, our Butler, Anthony, a local with a smiling and helpful disposition, meets us. He takes us into the one bedroom suite that is to be our home for two nights. The one bedroom suite is spacious with high vaulted ceilings, marble floors and contemporary colonial style of decoration that gives a cool and Zen like ambiance to the space. A generous lounge area complete with mini bar and Italian coffee maker all hidden behind sleek walnut doors, leads to large full height glass doors that open to a plunge pool and sun lounge area, and although our suite does not have sea views, (as most of the 2 bedroom suites do) we have views over the gardens and the 17th century church in the distance. The master bedroom which also opens to the patio has a large king four poster bed, beautiful and practical, as mosquito nets pull over at night to protect us from being bitten whilst we sleep. A dressing

room with his and hers wardrobes and two full size bathrooms both with baths and showers complete the accommodation. Every detail has been thought through from the Italian coffee pods, luxury Aqua de Palma bath products, fluffy bathrobes and slippers, to plug adaptors to suit appliances you have brought with you from your home country.

There is a range of accommodation to suit whatever party size you might have, from one and two bedroom suites, some with sea views, to privately owned Villas, that can sleep up to 12 guests. Each Villa is unique in its style and decoration but what they all have in common will be an impressive sea view and the highest quality of Italian influenced decor and fittings, both inside and out.

Small and easily navigated—golf carts replace cars here and Anthony leaves us with our own





room numbered golf cart to use to reach the facilities. Restaurants and bars have an Italian tone reflecting the heritage of the estate, and are either at the resort center which is a short buggy drive from our room and provides for al fresco breakfast at Bellini's Bar and Bistro with either vies towards the sea or the beautiful 17th century church (the only surviving building after the island most destructive hurricane in 1921), or look inland to the golf course. For dinner 'La Piazza' offers a truly Italian experience. We visited Shell Beach Bar and Grill, a 10-minute buggy drive winding across the golf course and down to the serene and sheltered bay with amazing views of the reef and the calm pools of crystal clear waters. We ate fresh catch of the day (barracuda) but the choices were varied dishes such as jerk chicken and roti a Caribbean staple, fresh lobster, along with burgers, salads and wraps were all on the menu.

An alternative to Shell Beach is the L'Ance Guyac Beach club, a semi-circle of tropical paradise: powder-fine white sand, crystal-clear azure water, a handful of thatch umbrellas over lounge chairs, it has a laid-back beach vibe. But at night it really comes into its own. Torches light the narrow stone path down to the beach, where the sound of the water lapping is the perfect soundtrack for a pre-dinner cocktail in the tented lounge on the sand. Across all the dining options service was attentive and helpful. Visitors of the Estate also have the choice of the restaurant at the Mandarin Oriental. If you are in Canouan to celebrate a special occasion then the view from the 13th hole at sunset is the place to be, a 360 degree view of the ocean and the islands, ideally with a picnic or selection of canapés, champagne or sundowner cocktails all provided on request by the estates dining team.

## Golf Course

Adam Hedges, director of golf, points the buggy up the steep and windy cart path as we begin the climb up to the 13th hole. He wants to show us the highest point of the course and then the dramatic descent down through the holes that make up the back 9 in advance of our round planned for the following day. Dodging tortoises as we go (the island's name derives from a local word for land turtle or tortoise) who number more than residents and range in size from your average pet to those that are giants. We are slightly awed into silence and can only wonder at the foresight of Jim Fazio to see a course at all in this terrain. The following morning after a brief warm up, we are ready to begin.

The front 9 present a more gentle start and are characterized by fairly wide fairways, gentle glimpse of the sea and no real hazards other than some ups and downs to the greens. The exception is the long par 5 6th hole, which is less forgiving for a wayward shot and has an incline that hints at what is to come. Hole 9 brings you conveniently back to the clubhouse. The course has effectively two types of terrain the first 10 holes and the 18th are situated within an amphitheater and more protected

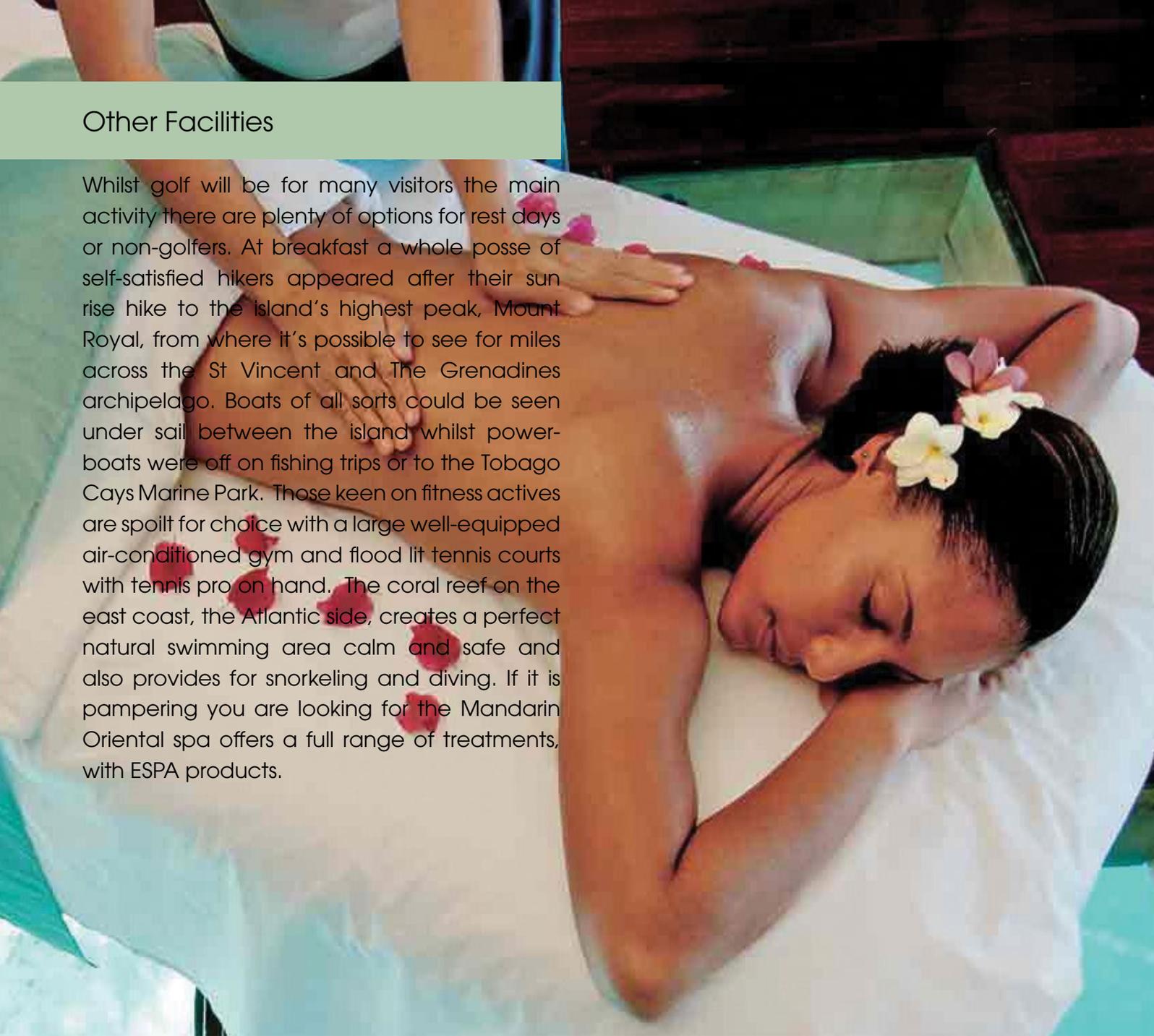
from the elements, as the wind can become quite a factor. From the 11th to the 17th the terrain becomes much more spectacular and vulnerable to the winds, and is built around Mount Royal which reaches 877 feet. The highest and most dramatic hole is the par 5 13th, perched on a ridge with stunning panoramic 360-degree views and of the islands. Long and intimidating it takes both concentration and resolve not to be distracted by the stunning views and sheer scale of the terrain. What goes up must come down and the 14th, a challenging par 3 drops 100 feet from tee to putting green, followed by the 16th, one of the longest par 3 in the world at 305 yards, from back tees, with a massive 200 feet drop. With relief we return to the gentler final hole, which ends with a generous fairly flat fairway.

This course is one of the most spectacular courses in the Caribbean and is set to improve further with Adam at the helm, the greens can be on the slow side for those used to championship standard courses and Adam is working hard to improve this. The out of bounds and rough areas have been thoughtfully developed to challenge but not hold up the game.



## Other Facilities

Whilst golf will be for many visitors the main activity there are plenty of options for rest days or non-golfers. At breakfast a whole posse of self-satisfied hikers appeared after their sun rise hike to the island's highest peak, Mount Royal, from where it's possible to see for miles across the St Vincent and The Grenadines archipelago. Boats of all sorts could be seen under sail between the island whilst power-boats were off on fishing trips or to the Tobago Cays Marine Park. Those keen on fitness activities are spoilt for choice with a large well-equipped air-conditioned gym and flood lit tennis courts with tennis pro on hand. The coral reef on the east coast, the Atlantic side, creates a perfect natural swimming area calm and safe and also provides for snorkeling and diving. If it is pampering you are looking for the Mandarin Oriental spa offers a full range of treatments, with ESPA products.



## Final Word

Canouan Estate was a delight to visit not least because most of the staff, more often than not locals who seem to smile continually and there is a genuine desire to welcome tourism to the island. The owner and developer of Canouan Estates has been very keen to take a philanthropic stance in the relationship with the local population and has contributed to the infrastructure of the island by building roads, installed electricity to the island and residents houses and provided desalinated water for the first time and more recently built the island's first secondary school.





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# Contributors

Front 9 Travel would like to thank the following contributors to the Autumn issue.



Carolyn Scott

Carolyn is an avid golfer and has spent many years visiting an array of luxury and unusual destinations around the world, and has consequently developed a discerning eye for what our clients at Front 9 Travel expect from our partner hotels and resorts.

She applies the same rigour of assessment and expectation of a quality client at the courses that she plays, appreciating that our clients expect the highest quality of accommodation and facilities, and to play excellent golf courses. At Front 9 Travel we are continually searching for new and exciting destinations to offer our clients and Carolyn is at the forefront of this, researching and writing our articles to give our clients a flavour of what is on offer.



Simon Lacey

Simon provides expertise for golfers travelling to Africa but not just limited to golf, as his 20 years of experience includes in depth knowledge on safaris throughout Southern Africa and more general local travel. His passion for Africa dates back to 1997 when he first visited South Africa touring in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Africa got so deep under his skin in that one trip, that in June 2000 he bought the company that organised the holiday. Since then he has visited every country in Southern Africa (and a few in East Africa) – some like Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia on several occasions. In 2013 a golf tour operator bought out his company and he then added golf to his African repertoire. Since then he has played almost thirty of the top golf courses in South Africa from the Cape Provinces to KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga and has even popped over the border to Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) to play Royal Swazi.



Rupert Diggins

In 2020, after 30 years working in the UK travel industry, Rupert took a giant leap of faith and created his own business, travel website and blog, "Just One For The Road".

So far during his working life, he has visited some of the most beautiful destinations, such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Middle East, Croatia and Bulgaria, attended some incredible business and sporting events including the Rugby World Cup in Japan and witnessed the most amazing wildlife.

'Just One For The Road', is a platform where he showcases a lifetime of not only his travel anecdotes and adventures but also enlists many of his travel industry friends and colleagues who he has met along the way, to do the same with fact filled and amusing articles that may inspire, educate or just entertain.

As well as reviews and blogs on hotels, golf clubs, resorts or countries they also from time to time bring you competitions and offers from selected partners.

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