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Italy

'Sue Lawley, Sue Lawley!' sang The Police. Now the newsreader is leading the chorus of praise for Puglia as a major golfing destination.



THE DETAILS

Scott Dunn offer seven nights at the new Borgo Egnazia, Puglia from £1,875 per person including return flights with British Airways and transfers. scottdunn.com or call 020 8682 5040.

It's just one of those things that has to be done. Perhaps as a sort of joke or once in a lifetime experience – once in a lifetime in the sense that you won't want to experience it a second time. Not unless you're one golf club short of a set or a sandwich short of a picnic. It's similar to wearing white high heeled shoes. (At least that's what I tell my snobby self.) Have you ever done it before? "No," says my husband, resolutely. Me neither. Will it be hideously embarrassing? "How can it be otherwise?"

Golf. We're going to play golf. I'd rather eat a packet of razors. But I know all about golfing clothes (and riding gear and how you should dress to throw a javelin, come to think about it.) So we sidle into the golf club and say we want The Kit. You know, Pringle Woman. I want to be head- to -toe as brassy as can be. Forget the fact that it's 28 degrees centigrade in the shade: I must have a lime Argyll sweater with diamonds on it and shoes with spikes. In white. After all, apparently golf shoes can make or break your game.

But there's a problem. A big problem. They don't sell clothes in this golf club. Not even polyester slacks. Just big tins of olive oil and sun visors and possibly signed photographs of Important People playing here, if you slip something to the nice man behind the desk. The reason being, perhaps, that the Italians on the course are already swinging their handbags containing eighty grands worth of golf clubs. And they're already

kitted out in Loro Piana, straight off a Milanese catwalk.

Welcome to San Domenico Golf near Savalletri in Puglia, southern Italy. A golf balls throw from Borgo Egnazia - the achingly smart new resort built as a modern interpretation of a traditional Apulian village. And the coolest recent addition to Italy's hotel scene.

We set off with Pietro, our coach. What's your handicap? he asks. "That I don't play, I guess." We're going to play nine holes: it says so on my schedule. Nine holes, impossible! says Pietro, wrinkling his brown face in the July sun. First you play in the range for four months, he reveals, then you go on the course. "Now listen, buddy, I can't stick around in a range for four hours let alone four months."

We go on the range. Pietro is going speak for five minutes on the fundamentals of the game. The position of the hands on the club geev the direction of the ball: good places of the 'ands and good shoulders eez important. He geevz a few shots. We observe with attenzio-ni. There's none of that weird talk about lateral water hazards, panting and chipping – yes, I've seen the signs around the club. Pietro just explains everything in a reassuringly straightforward way.

Golf is as ridiculous as it looks, but more difficult. We swing our bats (racquets or whatever they are) the way he tells us, but it would be quicker to throw the damned ball. I do backswings and downswings with my 7 iron golf club.

(Nothing to do with laundry.) I practise more shots than a Grand Slam. I discover muscles unused since the Iron Age.

But then something happens... Gradually at first, I begin to enjoy the challenge. My husband – who often watches the Ryder Cup, sneakily – enthuses that Pietro is an excellent teacher. And he is, no question: with his guidance, I even stop believing that Tiger Woods is a wildlife sanctuary. And start to wonder how I can improve my swing; and feel curious waves of goodwill for something that requires so much focus and concentration; and that – time to fess up - stretches me so much physically and mentally.

Soon the Apulian fairy sprinkles a little more Fairy Dust for Golfers. The sea breeze caresses our faces and the sun shines down. We breathe in air that's pure. And look out to the Adriatic on one side and, on the other, the remnants of the ancient Roman ruins of the city of Egnazia. Reader, I'm hooked.

At San Domenico Golf you can see the sea from every hole. The grass is shaved, manicured and green as a lollipop – like velvet, really. Additionally there are dragonflies, lakes, olive trees and palms. As the nearby waves crash, the Apulian wildflowers sway gently in the wind. Pretty panting, eh?

We eat lunch in the golf club. Home made spaghetti with green beans and basil, drizzled with olive oil from the Borgo Egnazia estate. Bowls of orichetti pasta (a local speciality like rabbits' ears) with the sweetest of sun-blushed

Words by
Caroline Phillips

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tomato sauces. And Mandorala, a scrummy local almond drink. It's not often that I have the chance to eat pasta that good and in a building that looks like a Moorish hunting lodge.

Keen golfer and TV presenter Sue Lawley feels the same way. "I've decided," she says, "that Puglia is the perfect spot for a personal golf clinic." She likes the fact that the area was settled by Romans and fought over by Crusaders and Turks in the Middle Ages. She loves the wind of the Adriatic. She also points out that the courses are comparatively empty – so that there are no waits and she doesn't have to play with strangers.

The Grand final of the European Chal-



lenge Tour was played here. San Domenico Golf also won the prize for the best kept golf course grass in Italy. And it can't be for nothing that helicopters drop their rich Roman and Milanese players here. One day, delightfully, there is even a helicopter jam. Recession, what recession?

I'll need to come back. Golf is my new passion. Sadly membership at San Domenico Golf is closed. But you can pay and play if you stay in Masseria Ciminno, an 18th century farmhouse beside the course. Or you can tee off here if you book into Masseria San Domenico, a peaceful house with a 15th century tower and oodles of old-fashioned

charm. Or if you lay your head in Borgo Egnazia, with its multo sympatico masseria-style hotel, townhouses and villas plus impeccable staff and even better food.

I may not be the world's best golfer with five Majors, 87 titles and four Ryder Cups. But there's no reason I shouldn't play a Very Big Challenge. Indeed, going forward, I can just imagine the professionals when faced with a tricky shot always asking themselves: 'Now what would Caroline do?' No longer would she hope just to put on the brassy kit, enjoy the view and then leg it to the club house for fresh pasta. Now she's got bigger and better things to do... CAROLINE PHILLIPS