

R&A GOLF COURSE COMMITTEE**VISIT TO SPAIN, 18-21 OCTOBER 2010****CLUB DE GOLF EL BONILLO (www.clubdegolfelbonillo.com), 19 October**

El Bonillo is over 2 hours by car south of Madrid in the Castilla-La Mancha region of Spain. Albacete is the nearest city and the landscape is dry and barren. This area of Spain is a centre for renewable energy with wind turbines a more regular feature to the landscape than trees (see image below) and some of the largest solar panel concentrations to be seen anywhere in the world. I was accompanied on this visit by David Gómez.



The 9-hole course is Council owned and operated, as is a far more rustic 9-holes on the same site. The Council employ a company to maintain the course and David Gómez acts as an auditor on behalf of the RSGF.

Developed on a barren landscape, though with plantations of pine trees to some holes, the course was opened two years ago. No earth movement was undertaken to build the course, though the piles of stone to the out of play areas between holes demonstrate the efforts taken to develop greens and fairways. It is a low maintenance facility, with a budget of only €30,000 a year excluding staff and machinery. Four people work on the golf course. The course uses recycled water and this reduces the amount of nitrogen that needs to be applied to keep the grass healthy. The image below shows the 9th green and is typical of the landscape.



Central Spain is very hot and dry through the summer, but can get very cold over winter with temperatures dipping below freezing. It is in the transition zone, so the most sustainable choice of grass is a matter of balancing up the pros and cons of each species related to the needs of the facility. At El Bonillo the fairways and rough are Bermudagrass with creeping bent greens and ryegrass tees. Grassing is limited to in play areas of tee, fairway, strip of semi-rough and greens. This provides an interesting contrast to the barren landscape beyond and puts an emphasis on keeping the ball on the turfed areas when playing golf.

Given the low budget, the turf quality was considered to be very good. The Bermudagrass provides good lies, as shown to the image below.



The creeping bentgrass greens were, perhaps, a little soft and this needs to be controlled to provide healthy and firm surfaces.

From the playing performance, environmental stewardship and social responsibility angles, El Bonillo scores highly with regards to sustainability. However, it is the economic performance that may prove difficult to balance. It is a low cost golf course to maintain but it does not have a high golfer population in the locality and this has to put a question mark against the sustainability of the project. Other attractions may be needed to draw golfers to the area.

The Council is considering developing the rustic course to make a full 18-hole course. Given the issues with revenue generation, the sense in spending substantial sums of money to do this has to be questioned. It may be far more cost-effective to build another set of teeing grounds to each of the existing holes to create different angles for the tee shot to the same fairway to create distinctive front and back nines. The rustic course is likely to have great value for beginners who may struggle on the main course with its limited grass cover.

SUMMARY

El Bonillo has been developed in a very sustainable manner, with no earth movement, utilising the barren native terrain as rough, the right grass choice for fairways, sensible limitation of grassing to the site and a low maintenance regime. It will make a good case study for these reasons. However, the viability of the course may be reliant on attracting golfers from outside the immediate vicinity and this could prove problematic in an area not known for its draw to business or tourism.

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27 October 2010