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GOLF

Where the rough is wild

Within a few years the Waterberg region of Limpopo is going to challenge the Garden Route as the leading golf destination in SA, writes Jed Martin

It took a surprisingly long time for SA to build a close connection between golf and game viewing, two leading drawcards for tourists, but this combination has taken off like a raging bush fire in recent years as developers have spotted the immense appeal of the wildlife experience.



For many years the only golf course that had any relationship with wildlife was the **Hans Merensky Country Club** at Phalaborwa in the far north east corner of SA. Slap bang against the boundary fence of the Kruger National Park - so close that golfers can actually hook shots into the game reserve - it provided a unique, if at times unnerving, experience for those who played the course.

The barrier fence was certainly no obstacle for the residents of the park, who literally could see that the grass was greener on the other side - lush fairways and inviting water hazards from which to drink.

An 18-hole golf course is not a big area of land, but over the years every member of the Big Five has been regularly spotted on the Hans Merensky fairways. The late Leon Pappas, who ran the pro shop - his four sons all became professional golfers - had a passion for photography and captured some dramatic wildlife moments on camera, including lion and cheetah kills. A German woman visitor playing golf was killed by an angry elephant in the late 1990s; trees on the course bear the claw marks of leopards; and the greenkeeper's bakkie has been charged by a buffalo.

Today, the big push among developers for golf and game is not occurring next to the Kruger National Park (though Hans Merensky has been upgraded from a country club into a resort/estate) but much closer to Gauteng's populace, thanks to the ability to freely move wild animals around the country to other spacious bushveld environments. The largely uninhabited and malaria-free Waterberg region of Limpopo has been chosen as the perfect place where golf and game can co-exist, within a two-hour drive of Sandton.

If you're travelling north on the N1 toll road between Pretoria and Polokwane, the Waterberg is inside the range of hills you begin seeing on your left near the turnoff to Bela-Bela (formerly known as Warmbaths). Pedi names have replaced the Afrikaans ones. You get a better idea of its beauty and bushveld feel if you veer off the highway and take the local R101 road through the towns that border these hills. The area has an old-fashioned look to it, and craft and produce stalls can be found along the way.

Four golf estates are already established and running in the Waterberg, and there are three other projects on the go - two of them taking the concept of golf and game to an entirely new level in terms of a bushveld experience for its residents and visitors. Homes will be on huge stands, some so isolated that you'll need your 4x4 to visit a neighbour. The Meletse estate, where Jack Nicklaus has been employed

as the course designer, is set in 16 000 ha of bushveld. To get your head around just how substantial a property this really is, you have to imagine the size of the sprawling Dainfern estate in Gauteng. Well, Dainfern would fit 50 times into Meletse!

Meletse will accommodate the Big Five of the animal kingdom with ease, as will the proposed Waterberg estate, which comes in at just under 6 000 ha. Waterberg, even with hundreds of homes, a luxury hotel and 18-hole golf course, will still have space for a significant wilderness area in which only people on foot or horseback will be allowed to venture.

The Limpopo provincial government sees tremendous potential for international tourism in the Waterberg, a competitor to the Kruger National Park. It has encouraged development of these golf estates in contrast to the Garden Route, where the Western Cape government has stymied the fast-tracking of golf estates through the approval process. But then the Garden Route doesn't need that many more developments to remain attractive to tourists, whereas Limpopo certainly does.

What's interesting is that the Waterberg is going to challenge the Garden Route within a few years as a leading golf destination within SA. Once it has a wider network of quality golf courses to choose from, and resorts and guest houses at which to stay, it is going to become a serious alternative for tourists and the huge Gauteng market. Right now, the Garden Route, with its range of spectacularly scenic golfing experiences on the rugged Tsitsikamma coast, is the mecca for both local and international visitors to enjoy a golfing holiday.

Some interesting concepts are unfolding in the Waterberg, which make them unique:

At Meletse, the developers - and this estate has strong financial backing from the Atterbury Property Group - are doing the opposite of what normally transpires on a golf estate project. Instead of selling stands off a site plan, they are first building the golf course and some of the facilities before launching sales. Buyers will thus have a better understanding of the lie of the land before committing. It certainly shows a confidence in the development by the investors to take this route.

The farming family behind the **Euphoria Golf Estate & Hydro** didn't go for a macho, big-name course designer like Nicklaus or Ernie Els, but chose a woman to put her signature to the 18-hole layout, Annika Sorenstam, the former ladies' number one who is to retire this year. Though not a designer by profession, Sorenstam gave her input on the course through her management company, IMG, which has a division specialising in the building of golf courses.

Few golf estate developments around the world have the courage to market and sell their properties using a woman golfer - the Kingswood estate in George has utilised Sally Little in a smaller way - and it has worked well for Euphoria, close to the town of Mookgophong (formerly Naboomspruit), whose previous claim to fame was the Venter trailer factory. Sorenstam will officially launch Euphoria on November 4, when the estate will also unveil another compelling feature, a cable car running to the top of a mountain overlooking the golf course. You will be able to dine at a restaurant with panoramic views of the veld.

Legends Golf & Safari Resort Extreme 19th, a par 3 hole played from the top of the Hangklip

Even more unusual is the **Legend Golf & Safari Resort** - backed by the Legend hospitality group and IFA Hotels & Resorts - where the 18-hole course has been designed by 18 different international golf stars. Each hole has been given its own personal signature by players such as Trevor Immelman, Jim Furyk, Colin Montgomerie, Vijay Singh, Sergio Garcia and Pdraig Harrington. This does sound a trifle gimmicky, but it's a novel approach that will appeal to golfers, local and international. It's an example of the creative thinking going into the development of the Waterberg.



Legend has already been marketed in Europe, and one of its selling points is the Extreme 19th, a par 3 hole played from the top of the Hangklip, part of the mountain escarpment bordering the estate. The only way of reaching the tee is by helicopter!

There is a 396 m vertical drop from the tee to a green shaped like the map of Africa. Cameras and tracking equipment follow the ball as it sails off the mountain top. The only possible way of reaching the green is to hit a driver with all your might, and the odds of landing on it are so remote that the developers have offered a US\$1m prize to the first person scoring a hole-in-one.

MORE INFO

- Meletse Golf Estate: www.meletse.com
- Waterberg: www.waterberg.com
- Euphoria Golf Estate & Hydro: www.euphoriaestate.co.za
- Legend Golf & Safari Resort: www.legend-resort.com
- Koro Creek: www.korocreek.com
- Zebula Golf Estate & Spa: www.zebula.co.za
- Elements Private Golf Reserve: www.elementspgr.co.za

Estates like Euphoria, Legend and Koro Creek are relatively close to civilisation and the N1 highway - Koro Creek is a residential estate in Modimolle (Nylstroom - which got its name from early Voortrekkers, who thought they had found the source of the Nile). Other estates like Zebula, which pioneered the concept of golf-course living in a Waterberg game reserve eight years ago with an American owner and Peter Matkovich design, and Elements are deeper in the bushveld, and visitors have to traverse dirt roads to reach them, adding to the feel of escaping the city. Meletse is one of the more remote and isolated estates in the Waterberg, 70 km west of Bela-Bela. It is a true getaway.

Securing a plentiful water supply is essential to establishing a golf estate in this region. Meletse has a vast underground lake fed by the seasonal Sand River flowing through the property. The new Waterberg estate, bordering Elements, where Gary Player is designing a course and his older brother, Ian, is advising on the wilderness area, originally failed to get off the ground a few years ago when it was discovered there was not enough water to sustain the project. Nicklaus and Els had been signed to a joint design venture, and withdrew when it collapsed. But developer Tony Georgiou has resuscitated his dream, acquiring more land with ample water reserves, and now has the Power Group as backers.