

GOLF MONTHLY
TOP 20
EUROPEAN COURSES

CREAM OF THE CONTINENT

Following the growing success of *Golf Monthly's* Top 100 UK and Ireland Course Rankings, we decided to introduce a list of our Top 20 European Courses. Contender tracks were assessed on six criteria (see page 169) by a panel of *Golf Monthly* senior staff, contributors and some well-travelled members of our senior reader panel who already assess courses for our biennial UK and Ireland rankings



The island green on Les Bordes' 558-yard 14th hole

1 VALDERRAMA 🇪🇸
ARCHITECT: Robert Trent Jones Snr **GF:** €300-€320 **W:** valderrama.com

Valderrama's superb design and its unmatched conditioning, history, wow factor and the sheer spine-tingling experience of visiting ensures it remains the benchmark by which all European courses are judged. There may be more difficult, scenic or better-value courses in our list but, when all the criteria were viewed together, the only course on the continent to have hosted the Ryder Cup emerged as our clear number one.

2 LES BORDES 🇫🇷
ARCHITECT: Robert Von Hagge **GF:** Guests of member only
W: lesbordes.com

The beautiful lakes of the Sologne come into play on the majority of holes on this extremely testing 1986 design in the Loire Valley. Widely recognised as Europe's hardest course (You get your name on a board if you break 80!) it's often regarded to be the epitome of risk/reward golf-course architecture. Les Bordes is also described as the Augusta of Europe. Sadly, this also applies to its exclusivity, although the new owners are planning a second course and hotel.

3 PGA CATALUNYA (Stadium) 🇪🇸
ARCHITECT: Angel Gallardo/Neil Coles
GF: €72-€100 **W:** pgacatalunya.com

Just ten years old, the Stadium Course (formerly known as the Green) was designed and built under the guidance of the European Tour in order to offer its alternative to the US PGA's Sawgrass. With fir trees, lush vegetation, scrub and even purple heather, the course is a visual delight and has been voted the best-looking track on the European Tour (it's also one of the hardest). The recently refurbished clubhouse and excellent off-course facilities complete the experience.

4 HALMSTAD (North) 🇸🇪
ARCHITECT: Rafael Sundblom & Nils Skold **GF:** €56 **W:** hgk.se

Located on a promontory jutting out into the sea, the North course is a place of great peace, tranquillity and even isolation. It was developed in two distinct phases; the first in the 1930s, the second some 30 years later using the original back nine whilst adding a new nine on land approved by the Swedish National Forest Enterprise. In 2007 it hosted the tenth staging of the Solheim Cup.



PGA Catalunya's 7th

5 SOTOGRANDE 🇪🇸
ARCHITECT: Robert Trent Jones Snr **GF:** €160 **W:** golfsotogrande.com

One of the most well-known holiday destinations for sun-seeking golfers, Sotogrande has constantly reinvented itself to meet the ever-increasing expectations of its visitors. Usually in tip-top condition, some consider it to be a worthy rival for Valderrama. Whilst not too demanding from the tee, its main defence is the elevated and sloping greens that mean the golfer must plot his way round strategically.

6 MORFONTAINE 🇫🇷
ARCHITECT: Tom Simpson **GF:** Guests of member only

With its origins dating back almost a century, this traditional design to the north of Paris has recently benefited from a Kyle Phillips makeover. There is an excellent quintet of short holes and the course weaves its way through a picturesque forest. Private and refined, it is a wonderful place to visit with an exceptional course.



Halmstad's par-5 14th



El Saler has been integrated into a protected landscape

7 BIELLA 🇮🇹
ARCHITECT: John Morrison **GF:** €70-€110 **W:** golfclubbiella.it

Midway between Milan and Turin, this beautiful par-73 course, set in rolling hills flanked by the foothills of the Alps, is known as 'Le Betulle' because of its century-old birch trees. Rocky outcrops, streams and ponds all add to the enormous fun on offer. In 2006 the course staged the European Individual Amateur Championship, won by Rory McIlroy.

8 EL SALER 🇪🇸
ARCHITECT: Javier Arana **GF:** €48-€105 **W:** paradors.es/en

Set in a nature reserve on the shores of the Mediterranean, El Saler was one of the first golf courses to be designed ecologically, specifically to be integrated into a protected landscape in as natural a way as possible. The terrain varies from linksland, reminiscent of some of the famous Scottish golf courses, to areas of typical Mediterranean pine forest.



The carefully sculpted Paris National

9 CHANTILLY (Vineuil) **ARCHITECT:** Tom Simpson **GF:** From €100 **W:** golfdechantilly.com

This early, tree-lined Tom Simpson design is defined by its deep and formidable bunkering and large, undulating greens. Currently celebrating its centenary, Chantilly is a classic parkland course and the club is renowned for its wonderful atmosphere.

10 NOORDWIJKSE **ARCHITECT:** Frank Pennink **GF:** €120 **W:** noordwijksegolfclub.nl

Although the course had to be relocated in 1972, happily it didn't have to move far and was still able to unfold over a superb tract of undulating dune land. Variety comes via a handful of holes running through the pines to the east, but this remains a classic, true test of links golf.

11 PARIS NATIONAL (Albatross) **ARCHITECT:** Hubert Chesneau **GF:** €80-€120 **W:** golf-national.com

The Albatross, one of the first 'stadium' courses, offers a severe test of golf which has acted as the annual venue for the French Open since 1991 for all but a couple of occasions. Fashioned over a less-than-inspiring original parcel of land, much has been made of water hazards and artificial sculpting which have resulted in an excellent and challenging layout that is best described as an 'inland links'.

12 SPERONE **ARCHITECT:** Robert Trent Jones Snr **GF:** €70-€95 **W:** sperone.com

Referred to as 'The Old Head of Europe' and the 'Pebble Beach' of the Med, Sperone boasts an incredible setting. The only 18-hole course on Corsica has some fabulous vistas over the water, the nearby islands and even across to Sardinia. Also, the stretch of holes from 12 to 16 is one of the most enjoyable and attractive anywhere.

13 KENNEMER **ARCHITECT:** Harry Colt **GF:** €100-€120 **W:** kennemergolf.nl

The natural links at Kennemer is another Harry Colt masterpiece that runs through magnificent, towering dunes with some blind drives and plenty of gorse. Genuinely old-fashioned – the club will celebrate its centenary next year – there is a great atmosphere here.

14 ROYAL ZOUTE **ARCHITECT:** Harry Colt **GF:** €95 **W:** zoute.be

Wounded in World War II, this championship course was nursed back to health by Lieutenant Colonel Allen, but is still unmistakably the work of Harry Colt who was commissioned to design the classic links more than a century ago. Quite British in feel, the club is welcoming and the course is in good shape throughout the year.



Monte Rei is the newest course on our list

15 CASTELCONTURBIA (Blue/Yellow) **ARCHITECT:** Robert Trent Jones **GF:** €65-€105 **W:** castelconturbia.it

Robert Trent Jones Snr designed the three loops of nine at Castelconturbia with the Blue (Chestnuts) and Yellow (Pines) being the two that have been used to stage the Italian Open. The Red (Oaks) nine is slightly longer, and all three boast well-defended greens that demand accurate approach shots. The course is very tranquil and the stunning views of the Italian Alps provide a wonderful backdrop.

16 VILAMOURA (old) **ARCHITECT:** Frank Pennink **GF:** €88-€119 **W:** oceanicogolf.com

Although only 40 years old, this is one of the elder statesmen of European courses. Straight driving will open up plenty of good scoring opportunities, but the greens are small and lapses in concentration will be punished. A respectful upgrade a few years back from Martin Hawtree – which included a state-of-the-art irrigation system – has ensured that this remains one of Iberia's must-play courses.

17 HAMBURG **ARCHITECT:** Harry Colt/Charles Allison/John Morrison **GF:** €70 **W:** hamburgergolf-club.de

Hamburg Golf Club (often called Falkenstein) dates back more than a century, but it was not until 1930 that it relocated to this undulating, heathland course. Now too short for Tour events, it was host to the German Open, won here in 1981 by a young Bernhard Langer who thus became the first German winner in the tournament's 70-year history.

18 MONTE REI (North) **ARCHITECT:** Jack Nicklaus **GF:** €125-€190 **W:** monte-rei.com

This beautiful and lush Jack Nicklaus course is set in the rugged hills to the east of Faro, away from the hustle and bustle of the Algarve's busier developments. The course is unusual for Portugal in that holes are not overlooked by sprawling developments and, even though there are some impressive properties being built onsite, housing densities will be kept relatively low ensuring the sense of space remains. Less than two years old, this is a fine upmarket course with a clubhouse, practice facilities and service levels to match.

19 BARSEBACK (Masters) **ARCHITECT:** Ture Bruce **GF:** €47 **W:** barseback-golf.se

Situated on the west coast of Sweden a few miles to the north of Malmo, the first seven holes at Barseback run through undulating woodland before a dramatic change of scenery as the course opens out towards the sea. The descent over water to the 8th green is followed by three more holes along the shore before a return to the forest.

20 SPORTING CLUB BERLIN **ARCHITECT:** Nick Faldo **GF:** €70-€90 **W:** sporting-club-berlin.de

This is another inland links, carved over relatively flat land and created from the imagination of Nick Faldo, his first design in continental Europe. With thick rough and very fast greens, the course is reckoned to be the toughest in the country and boasts no fewer than 133 bunkers.



Vilamoura Old's 16th

GM RECOMMENDS 15 more highly regarded tracks

Bogogno (Italy), **Domaine Imperial** (Switzerland), **El Prat** (Spain), **Emporda Forest** (Spain), **Furnas** (Portugal/Azores), **Koninklijke Haagsche** (Holland), **Oitavos Dunes** (Portugal), **National** (Turkey), **Pevero** (Italy/Sardinia), **Prosper** (Czech Republic), **Seddiner See South** (Germany), **Seignosse** (France), **Son Gual** (Spain/Mallorca), **Tat** (Turkey), **Troia** (Portugal)

EUROPE'S TOP COURSES ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

- **Quality of test and design:** This includes an overview of the balance of the course including the mixture of par 3s, 4s and 5s, variety of hole design, the use of hazards and the test of golf on offer to all levels of player from scratch to 28 handicap. **15 marks**
- **Course condition and presentation:** This focused on the courses' appearance. From tees to greens, how good is the conditioning? How well-maintained and presented is it? **15 marks**
- **Visual appeal:** How pleasing are both the course and the surrounding environment to the eye? **10 marks**
- **Off-course:** How good are the practice facilities, locker rooms, eating and drinking options and, generally, how well looked after are visiting golfers? **10 marks**
- **Must-play factor:** Is this a course UK golfers should make an effort to play, and will the course live up to reputation? **10 marks**
- **Value for money:** Is a visit to the course good value for money. *Golf Monthly* strongly believes courses that charge expensive green fees can be good value, but only if they deliver to a high standard on all of the other five criteria. **5 marks**
- Total mark calculated out of 65

ASSESSING PANEL

Michael Harris, Neil Tappin, Jeremy Ellwood, Rob Smith, Malcolm Campbell, William Forde, Charles Briscoe Knight, Tim Browne, Malcolm Peake, Alan Ferguson, Bryan Bull, Christian Morris.

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