

# THE MAGIC OF VALDERRAMA

*Golf Monthly* pays tribute to the unique charms of Robert Trent Jones Snr's Spanish masterpiece, unequivocally continental Europe's finest course

Words Neil Tappin | Photography Valderrama Golf Club/Getty Images



Thread the needle: the view to the 2nd green



Ryder Cup joy in 1997



The famous Peter Dobreiner room



A view back to the clubhouse

**I**n October 2007, I travelled to Spain for the Volvo Masters; it was my first visit to Valderrama. Unlike the majority of press in attendance that week, I was not there to gather news about the tournament and report back with a blow-by-blow account. Instead, I arrived at 4 o'clock on the Monday afternoon with one simple task: to interview one of the Tour's star players.

The interview had been in my diary for about six weeks, but it was only as I walked through the club's grand entrance that the bad news filtered through. The player – who for the purposes of upholding good media relations shall remain nameless – had cancelled. Apparently, he had forgotten to shave that morning and did not want to pose for any photographs. So you can imagine my mood as I stood looking out over the Valderrama practice ground knowing that my only reason for being there had evaporated into thin Andalucian air.

Feeling understandably irritated and not to mention a little worried about what the boss would say when I returned to the UK with a hefty expenses bill but no feature, I took a walk through Valderrama's famous back nine. In fading sunlight the course was almost entirely deserted and



Onwards and upwards: the par-5 11th

**WITH ITS ENDURING ASSOCIATION TO THE GAME AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL, VALDERRAMA OFTEN DRAWS COMPARISON TO THE AUGUSTA NATIONAL**

with very few advertising hoardings and no hospitality tents (that's how they do things at Valderrama), I began to see it, not as a typical Tour venue, but as a genuine members course. Unfolding in front of me was a series of challenges that were uncompromisingly difficult and spine-tinglingly exciting. I spent the next hour walking through the thin avenues of contorted cork trees contemplating how my own game would fair. Much to my surprise, I did not need a golf club in my hands to appreciate the intricacy of the layout.

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

This was my first taste of the magic of Valderrama, a course that has been nurtured by its present owner Don Jaime Ortiz Patino as if it were his own flesh and blood. It was the owner of the Soto grande estate however, Joe McMicking, who commissioned Robert Trent Jones Snr to design the original layout back in 1974. Known then as Soto grande New, the course was renamed in 1981 as Las Aves. Throughout this period Ortiz Patino, a timing magnate who lived on the Soto grande estate, could see real potential in the course. In 1984 he formed a five-man consortium that bought Las Aves along with certain crucial plots of land as part of their plan to transform a good course into one of the greats. With a

healthier budget second time round, Trent Jones accepted the task of bringing Ortiz Patino's vision to life. And so the Valderrama we know today came into being.

One of the many areas that required improvement was the 8th (the hole that would later become the 17th when the two nines were switched). Before the redesign, legendary golf writer Peter Dobereiner had described it as, "a long slogging par 5 where the only requirement is to move the ball forward". So Trent Jones devised a plan to add a little excitement to the hole, thus creating a more-fitting finale to the round. Trent Jones, however, was unable to be on site to supervise the alterations so he asked for Seve Ballesteros and his design team to carry out the improvements. Between them Ballesteros and Trent Jones (with more than a passing input from Ortiz Patino himself) shortened the hole, put a lake in front of the

new green and created the 17th we know today – one of the most iconic golf holes in the world of golf.

Valderrama was still a work-in-progress when the European Tour's headline sponsor, Volvo, chose it as the venue for the Tour's season finale back in 1988. That year the tournament was won by Nick Faldo, whose level-par score was proof, if needed, that the course was capable of pushing the best to the limit. Since then it has remained a fixture in the diaries of the world's best players hosting 16 Volvo Masters, two World Golf Championships and one Ryder Cup (it is still the only venue outside the US and the British Isles to have hosted the latter).

**TOUR PROFILE**

With its enduring association to the game at the highest level, Valderrama often draws comparisons to the Augusta National. But as I returned to the Spanish club last November – this time with my clubs in tow – it became clear that these two giants have little in common in terms of design. Valderrama is considerably shorter, its greens are smaller and its fairways far tighter. While Augusta is dominated by sweeping changes in elevation and skyscraper pine trees, Valderrama ebbs gently up and down and its short cork trees

twist in every possible direction. But what the two clubs undoubtedly do share is an aura, a character of their own that enables them to host the best players in the world without being upstaged. At Valderrama, this atmosphere is created as much in the clubhouse as out on the course.

For such a prestigious venue, the clubhouse makes no grand proclamations. It is essentially the same Andalusian structure that Ortiz Patino inherited when he bought the club back in 1984. There have, of course, been major improvements, but it remains beautifully understated. There are no superfluous seating areas or endless corridors. Instead, every room serves a purpose to its members and visitors.

As you walk through the clubhouse, you begin to understand Ortiz Patino's devotion to the game. His many treasured golfing artefacts – bought at various stages through the years – now adorn display cabinets that are dotted around the building. There is also a library-come-snooker room dedicated to the memory of Peter Dobereiner, that is packed with literature including old issues of *Golf Monthly* and autobiographies of the game's greatest players. Any golf writer visiting the club can sign a book in the Dobereiner room, adding his name to a list that seems to include the game's greatest scribes. My own opportunity to sign this book came last November. It was an especially

poignant moment for me as Dobereiner was a long-standing member at my home club, West Kent, and was a friend of my father. Indeed, ten years earlier I had won a trophy dedicated in his memory to the junior section.

All this simply underlines Valderrama's identity as a golfer's club with a healthy life away from the professional ranks. Indeed, the evolution of the European Tour means the season will now finish thousands of miles east of Andalucia among the golden sands of Dubai. This, of course, is exciting but it is also very sad because as we stand, Valderrama is missing from the list of venues for 2009. There is, however, a statement on the club's website from Ortiz Patino's son, Felipe, that suggests we haven't seen the last of this famous Spanish club on the world stage. "We are actively working towards hosting a major tournament in the future."

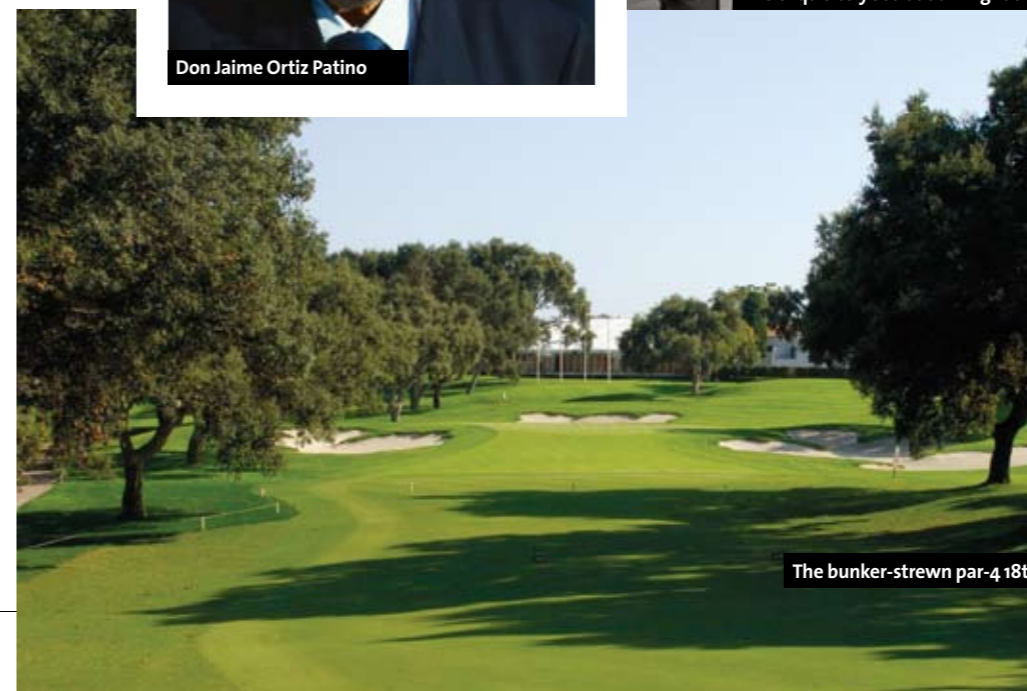
The reality is that Valderrama doesn't need the fame of the Tour, and the Tour will get by without this Spanish giant. But those who have tasted the magic of Valderrama will have their fingers crossed. Trent Jones has created a masterpiece that balances the intensity of the challenge with enjoyment from start to finish. Valderrama is without question one of the golfing world's most valuable treasures – and it deserves its place in the spotlight.



Don Jaime Ortiz Patino



The exquisitely set-out dining room



The bunker-strewn par-4 18th

**5 HISTORIC MOMENTS AT VALDERRAMA**



**LANGER'S COURSE RECORD OCTOBER 28, 1994:** Bernhard Langer shot a course record 62 in the second round of the Volvo Masters en route to a one-shot victory over Seve Ballesteros and Vijay Singh. "That is certainly one of the top three rounds in my life, and it came at a very important time for me," said Langer.

**THE RYDER CUP SEPTEMBER 26-28, 1997:** Seve's winning side (above) contained five rookies – Björn, Clarke, Garrido, Parnevik and Westwood. Europe scraped home by a point with America's trio of 1997 Major winners, Tiger Woods (Masters), Justin Leonard (Open Championship) and Davis Love III (USPGA) contributing just one win from their 12 matches.

**WOODS WINS THE WGC NOVEMBER 7, 1999:** Tiger Woods rolled in a 12ft birdie putt on the first hole of a sudden-death play-off to edge out Miguel Angel Jiménez in a thrilling climax to the first WGC event held in Europe. Woods appeared to have blown victory with a triple bogey 8 at the 71st to see a two-shot lead collapse into a one-stroke deficit. However, a Jiménez bogey at the last opened the door.

**MONTY AND LANGER FINISH IN THE DARK NOVEMBER 10, 2002:** In near darkness, Colin Montgomerie missed a 10ft putt at the second extra hole that would have given him victory over Langer, and so the Volvo Masters title was shared. It was Monty's eighth play-off on the European Tour – the preceding seven he had lost.

**MCDOWELL'S ALBATROSS NOVEMBER 4, 2007:** Graeme McDowell holed a 7-iron from 186 yards to make an albatross at the notorious 17th on the final day of the Volvo Masters. It catapulted him into a tie for the lead. But an adrenaline-fuelled bogey at the final hole excluded him from the play-off.

# TAKING ON VALDERRAMA

A visit to Valderrama last November gave *Golf Monthly's* editor Mike Harris the chance to take on his deputy, Neil Tappin, in a blow-for-blow contest on this European giant...

One of the best things about being an ordinary golfer is being able to follow in the footsteps of the tour pros and pit your game against a course that has tested the best. I teed it up at Valderrama with Neil Tappin (GM's deputy editor) a few weeks after the Volvo Masters. We played medal format from the Championship tees and had the obligatory €10 on the lowest net score (I'm off 8, Neil is off 5). I also set myself a personal target of breaking 90.

**HOLE 1 339M PAR 4:** Hit a good drive that finishes in what looks to be position 'A' but on arrival at the ball I find that I still need to get it up and over some trees. Catch a wedge a fraction thin, ball clips the top of a tree and drops down into a bunker. Splash out, but only into the fringe. Hit a poor chip, still 25ft from the cup. Race first putt past, don't hole the return. Leave the green a tad shell shocked! **7**

**HOLE 2 345M PAR 4:** A drive to the right of the famous cork in the fairway leaves me obscured again. Approach hits a tree and drops down beside a bunker. Semi-shank my chip leaving myself still in rough. Scared, I decide to putt, but don't hit it hard enough and it stays in the fringe. Two more putts to get down. **6**



Trouble awaits at the par-5 4th

**HOLE 3 153M PAR 3:** Solid 6-iron leaves me a good birdie chance. I miss it. Tap in for par. **3**

**HOLE 4 470M PAR 5:** Drive drifts right into the rough from where I can only punch a 5-iron up the fairway. Sensible play would be to lay up, but I don't! Good strike but it drifts right into the pond. Chip from DZ and take two putts. **7**

**HOLE 5 332M PAR 4:** Good drive into the wind leaves me a 9-iron, which finishes hole high 10ft away. Make the birdie putt. **3**

**HOLE 6 138M PAR 3:** Well-struck 7-iron fades in, finishes 14ft to the left of the hole. Fast left-to-right putt goes 6ft by, but I hole the return. **3**



Editor Mike Harris plays the par-3 3rd hole

**HOLE 7 424M PAR 4:** Left-to-right cross-wind takes my drive just off the fairway. Intended 4-iron punch comes out like I topped it. Ball finishes 40m short. Chip to 10ft, miss par putt. **5**

**HOLE 8 296M PAR 4:** Couldn't have hit drive any better, but still need to be five yards left of where I finish for a clear route to the green. Low pitch under branches, which although I play well doesn't hold the green. Skinny chip fortunately hits an acorn en-route, which pops the ball up and it ends stone dead! **4**

**HOLE 9 386M PAR 4:** Drive leaks right into the rough. Heavy 5-iron short of the green. Pitch spins back into fringe from where I three-putt. Very clumsy! **6 (44 to the turn)**

**HOLE 10 333M PAR 4:** Good drive down the middle leaves me a perfect 8-iron yardage in. Low and ugly cut finishes in the bunker short right. Fail to get up and down. **5**

**HOLE 11 476M PAR 5:** Good drive and second leave me with a 9-iron in. Catch a flier from the rough and I'm through the green. Nearly hole the chip, but it ends up 6ft past. Don't make the par putt, and then miss a tiddler. **7**

**HOLE 12 180M PAR 3:** Frankly petrifying tee shot into a very strong wind. Choke down on the shaft of my driver! Finish through the green on a downhill lie. Three-putt. **5**

**HOLE 13 341M PAR 4:** Drive finds the fairway, but I have to fade a 5-iron round a tree to hit the green. Having done this I then proceed to notch-up my third consecutive three-putt. **5**

**HOLE 14 315M PAR 4:** Hit 9-iron approach to 5ft, but lip out for birdie. **4**

**HOLE 15 183M PAR 3:** Scared of going right so pull my tee shot. Fail to get up and down. **4**

**HOLE 16 354M PAR 4:** Tee shot finishes left so my route to the flag is blocked. Punch a 5-iron under the branches, but it finishes in thick rough to the right of the green. Sure I'm looking at 5 at best, but make a good up and down. **4**

**HOLE 17 453M PAR 5:** Good drive leaves me 210m to the pin over the lake. Sensible shot is to lay up, but can't resist taking it on. Hit it so heavy that it ends up in the fairway bunker 70m short! Airmail approach into back bunker. Scary shot from downhill lie back towards water doesn't make it on. I then three-putt from the fringe. **7**

**HOLE 18 397M PAR 4:** Trying to draw the ball round into the fairway I overdo it and end up in the trees having to make a stance in a drainage ditch. A good punch out with 4-iron leaves me in the right rough some 70 yards short. Hit a 56-degree wedge to 6ft, but above the hole, miss the putt and tap in for another bogey. **5 – Total 90 (Neil, 86)**

**THE VERDICT:** Valderrama is one of the most testing courses I have ever played. Poor course management is punished and you'll need to think about every shot if you're to play anywhere near your handicap. It is a relentless test, which can leave you feeling bewildered. But the fabulous design, condition and surroundings inspire and exhilarate you at every turn. If you ever have the chance, play it!



Visitor tee times at Valderrama are available every day of the week. Inquiries should be directed to the general manager Derek Brown. ([generalmanager@valderrama.com](mailto:generalmanager@valderrama.com)) GM