

The opening green at Eye of Africa is attractively framed by trees.

2011
Best New
COURSE

EYE-CATCHING WINNER

Greg Norman's design at Eye of Africa stands out as golf course designers go through a tough period with little work. By **STUART McLEAN**

IT TOOK GREG Norman far longer than he had envisioned to finally see one of his golf course designs opened for play in South Africa. He first came here seven years ago at the height of the golf estate boom

to design a golf course in the Garden Route. However, that project didn't get far, although evidence still remains of Le Grand George across a river gorge from the Oubaai estate. Another prospective Norman design in Pretoria, The Hills, was similarly ill-fated.

However, it was third time lucky for the Great White Shark when he was commissioned to design the Eye of Africa course south of Johannesburg. Opened for play in 2010, this attractive

layout is our Best New Course winner for 2011. Originally part of an exclusive estate, it is now open to visitors, and you can play it for as little as R250 on a Tuesday, which includes a golf cart. It's one of those modern estate courses where a cart is virtually essential to enjoy the round. Walking there on a hot summer's day might be like signing up for boot camp. It's a long trek if you take in the walks between green and tee; there is a steep uphill section for two

consecutive holes; and you don't return to the clubhouse until the 18th.

Sadly, but not surprisingly in these recessionary times, Eye of Africa didn't have any competition for the award this year. It was the only new course opened in South Africa between March 1, 2010 and February 28, 2011, the time frame of eligibility. In fact, it is the only new course opened the last two years, which reflects the lack of work for a struggling golf design and construction industry in

this country and worldwide. The previous five years (2005-2009) had seen 28 new courses opened.

Local course designers who had thrived in the previous 15 years have seen a grim new reality. What work is being generated tends towards less lucrative renovation or piece-meal improvement work. Designer Phil Jacobs, who was Gary Player's right-hand man for many years, emigrated to Perth in Western Australia so that he could be

closer to the Far East, joining many American designers who are now looking for contracts in China and Korea, where the demand for new courses continues. Peter Matkovich has been travelling outside our borders to countries like Ghana, Malawi, Zambia and Namibia to gain contracts. His next course to be opened will be Omeya, a bushveld design which is part of an estate close to Windhoek.

South Africa is not alone in the



BEST NEW
Course

2010	Serengeti
2009	Legend
2008	Blair Atholl
2007	St Francis Links
2006	Elements
2005	Simola
2004	Zebula
2003	Pearl Valley
2002	No winner
2001	Blue Valley
2000	Links at Fancourt

The par-4 18th hole.

scarcity of new work. Only 12 new courses were opened in North America in 2011, compared to a record high of 399 courses in 2000. That number had dropped to 125 by 2005. And the United States is seeing the closure of many courses every month.

Eye of Africa is a worthy addition to the South African golfing landscape and up there in terms of quality with recent Best New Course winners. What separates it from most other new courses in Gauteng is that it's in a beautiful and tranquil part of the countryside, away from traffic noise. It's a course with generous playing corridors and subtly challenging greens complexes. The greens at Eye of Africa are magnificent both in terms of the thought which went into their design, and surfaces which are a dream to putt on.

I had previously played only one of Norman's courses – the Doonbeg links in Ireland – and the Australian certainly has a flair about him that makes his holes stand out from each other. He's not a fan of conformity or brutally long par 4s, but rather holes which most golfers think they can par before discovering that he has used the land cleverly to provide the challenge. The fairways at Eye of Africa look wide when viewing them from the tee, but most holes have

an easier side from which to attack the green. And if you're not careful, he will have your ball running away from you into an area where you don't really want to be.

Norman is helped in this respect by the Eye's cynodon grass fairways. They make for firmer fairways compared to the kikuyu most golfers are used to in Gauteng, which gives you extra length off the tee. But these firm fairways can also have shots running on into well-positioned bunkers that pinch the driving areas and entrances to greens. I liked the way Norman defended the fairway of his finishing hole, a strong par 4, with a phalanx of bunkers.

The course, which has a splendid practice range in front of the temporary clubhouse facilities, is surprisingly quick to play for an estate layout. When I played there recently in a fourball behind the field we were comfortably round in 4½ hours with a stop at the halfway kiosk. It's difficult to miss fairways and lose golf balls, although those who do hit big hooks and slices will not enjoy the long grass that frames the holes. Finding a ball in that stuff requires a sniffer dog. Elevation changes through undulating terrain provide you with a good picture of each hole. Even the steeply uphill holes, I thought, had

been attractively presented.

One criticism is that the bulk of the holes, 12 of them, from the fourth to the 15th, are set in a treeless valley (filling up now with about 50 estate homes), and they contrast sharply with the opening and closing holes which are more remotely individual in their settings. The beauty of the two closing holes, 17 and 18, or the third, makes you wish there were more with this kind of character throughout the layout. The birdlife in the bush around these holes is exceptional.

Also, like Gary Player's design at Blair Atholl, there is a curiously extreme difference in length between playing from the pro or club tees: Eye of Africa measures a formidable 6 934 metres from the tips (rating 73), yet just 6 188 metres from the club markers (rating 70). With a gap of 746 metres, resistance to scoring off the club tees is not that strong. It's a course where the golf director needs to move his club tees back to the front of the pro tees on certain holes, to spice up the competitive challenge.

Affiliated visitors to Eye of Africa pay a weekday green fee of R350 (specials on Tuesdays and Thursdays), and R410 on weekends. The fee for non-affiliated is R420 and R535. ♣