

GREAT White African DELIGHT

Brendan Barratt recently attended what has become a rather rare event these days – the opening of a new golf course. He reckons that Greg Norman's Eye of Africa course, located to the south of Johannesburg, has all the right ingredients to become a modern clas-

As plans for new golf courses around the country have been put on ice, presumably until the economy 'turns', it is reassuring to see that new layouts that have opted to launch during the testing times have spared no expense when it comes to the golf courses.

To say Greg Norman's new layout, Eye of Africa, has 'ignored current trends' or 'spared no expense' would be missing the point – this course in the countryside to the south of the Big Smoke would be an impressive track no matter what economic conditions the world found itself in.

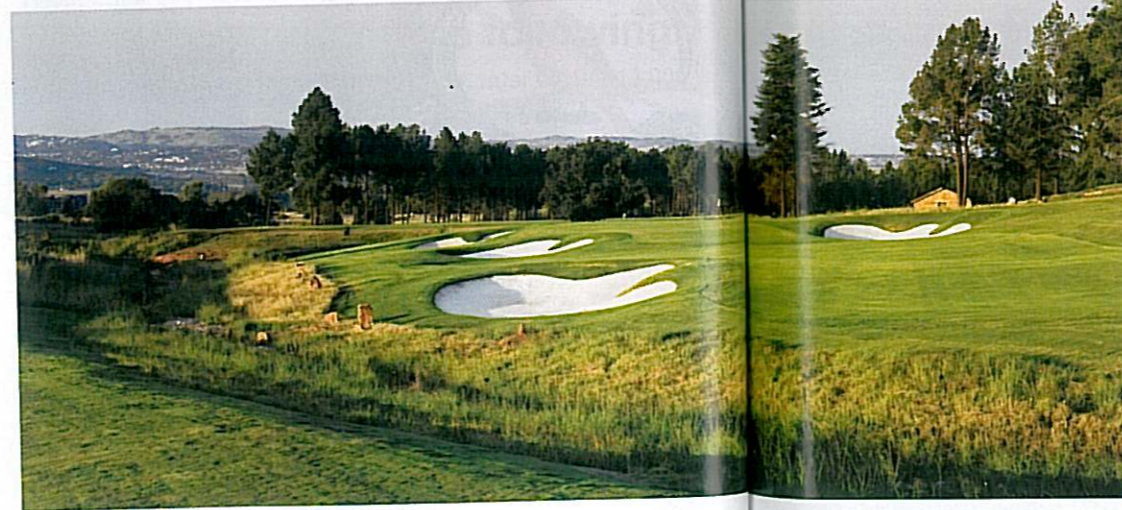
I like the fact that the layout is rather like its designer – big and brash, and yet somehow completely irresistible. In his prime, Norman was one of the greatest drivers of a golf ball – tremendously long and normally very accurate – so it is interesting to see how the former world No 1 has designed the course more with the average golfer in mind than someone of his

ilk. Indeed, the fairways at Eye of Africa are wide and inviting and the ball tends to travel a long way at this altitude, so a player is often left with nothing but a short-iron in to the very large greens here.

Even the bunkering is fairly straight-forward, both on the fairway and around the greens, with no hidden perils. If you do find yourself in the sand at Eye of Africa, you can be sure it has more to do with an errant shot than an unlucky bounce.

The putting surfaces are large and slope gently, somewhat deceiving the player into thinking that any spot on the green is a safe two-putt. While being able to easily read the line of a putt is one thing, consistently two-putting from 50 feet is quite another, so Eye of Africa requires accurate approach shots for good scoring.

I got the feeling that a player intent on preserving a decent score could happily take a 3-wood or hybrid off most tees and still bump it around steadily without it be-



coming too long. The more aggressive player might try to overpower this course and, although there are certainly a number of holes which can be attacked, just one errant drive could spell disaster as there are only two cuts of rough at Eye of Africa – the short semi-rough and grass so long you would need a GPS to find your way out.

While the layout is by no means

tricked up – Norman seems to have employed a 'what you see is what you get' design philosophy – it is also far from being a walkover, and the overall effect is of playability, despite the course being very young. The bent-grass greens run smoothly and the cynodon fairways are firm and green for now, although they are expected to go dormant during winter, which

means they will require minimum watering during the dry season.

The above refers to Eye of Africa from the club tees, but it is from the championship markers that Norman's true design talent shines through.

I would encourage any player to have a look at each hole from the back tee. Even if you don't actually peg it up from the tips, from here

the shape and character of the hole is markedly different and the straight-forward tee shot that would greet you on the club tee is significantly more challenging in terms of length and shape required. I would hope that those who set up the course ask the regular club golfers to play from the back on some of the holes every now and again – with four or five sets of tees on each hole, they are certainly able to mix it up a bit. From the tips, the par-72 layout measures an imposing 6 900 metres, which is trimmed down to 6 200 metres from the club tees and 5 000 metres for the ladies. Due to the long distances between the greens and the next tees, the course is a 'carts only' track, but this should not detract from the impressive nature of Norman's first South African layout and, given the undulation of the land, you may well end up grateful for the wheels under your feet.

One of the features of the course that impressed me – but I suspect might cause a fuss among other golfers – was the lack of a

halfway house. Too often a good round can be ruined or turned into a very long round by the unnecessarily long wait after nine holes. Eye of Africa is played as a continuous loop with a small structure offering grab-and-go snacks and drinks after nine holes.

The closing three-hole stretch is particularly charming, with a short par three, testing par five and a lengthy par four providing the perfect recipe for either a grandstand finish or a messy finale.

These holes also do much to leave a lasting impression of a mature, immaculate layout when, in fairness, some parts of the opening stretch give away the youthfulness of the course. In time, when the course has grown up a bit, I am certain many will consider it to be one of Johannesburg's finest.

As a new estate, the course has a temporary clubhouse adjacent to the driving range, but by all accounts the plans for the new clubhouse and indeed the entire estate are impressive.

The plot of land, at 667 hectares, is very large for a golf estate, but there will be around 1 200 freehold stands and up to 2 000 sectional-title units by the time the estate is completed. Even then, more than half of this enormous piece of real estate will be allocated as open spaces and community facilities.

It may be located 17 kilometres south of the hustle and bustle of Jo'burg's CBD, but you would consider yourself in the middle of the countryside on this estate, which is officially in the suburb of Kliprivier.

The estate is developed by Australian developer Medallist – a joint venture between Norman's Great White Shark Enterprises and Macquarie Group – and the golf course is open to homeowners and their guests, with limited outside membership available.

Those lucky enough to get onto the course will pay a reasonable R330 as an affiliated guest on week-ends and R275 during the week.

For more information, log onto www.eyeofafrica.co.za. 