

THE PLACE TO BE
A number of holes on the North course wrap around water features, and the 12th, *main*, is no different. *Below*, the putting course is good fun for kids and the restaurants are sensational.

GOLF ESCAPES

Quinta do Lago

The popular Algarve resort, known for attracting the rich and famous, has undergone a number of huge upgrades recently. We sent **David J Whyte** to find out if the changes live up to the hype at this Portuguese hideaway.

PHOTOS: JASON LIVY / DAVID J WHYTE

I'VE BEEN coming to Quinta do Lago regularly over the years and was thinking on this visit, it might be getting a bit long-in-the-tooth. It is, after all, 50 years old! I like coming back to a place I know. The same old roundabout greeted me with its famous squiggly 'Q' sign. I noticed the offices where Rita, the PR manager, used to work. I wondered if she was still there. The familiar Algarve heat hit me!

The last time I was here was when Paul McGinley opened his golf academy nearly a decade ago. Before that, I brought the family and we rented a small villa with pool. QDL is flexible that way. Plenty for everyone! This time I checked into the Magnolia, the resort's 'boutique' hotel but it reminds me more of a 1950s American motel.

Set just outside the resort, it's handy for all the courses and amenities not to mention other courses in the area such as Vilamoura, San Lorenzo and Vale do Lobo. For that reason, the Magnolia is popular with golf groups - not to mention its reasonable prices. If you're looking for something ritzier, there are options in and around QDL such as The Wyndham, The Conrad and the Hotel Quinta do Lago, all top 5-star.

We had lunch at the more than acceptable



Magnolia then headed for our first round.

THE NORTH COURSE

The North is one of the many courses that would fair better if they were located somewhere else! In this case, the 'sisters' are just so darned attractive! Nevertheless, it's a good opening round with long fairways laced between umbrella pines and undulating terrain, making for a steady test of length and accuracy while roomy enough for us average types.

Definitely a 'buggy' course, the North has seen sizable improvements since I last played. McGinley had a hand in the recent remodelling a couple of years ago and it benefits from the high level of greenkeeping applied to all the resort's courses. Water comes in most notably at the 12th, a long, trepidatious turn around a yawningly large lake leaving an unsettling leap to reach the green.

THE SOUTH COURSE

The Portuguese Open's been played on the South eight times now so it has the pedigree. The terrain is flatter than the North and the ball seems to sit up better. There's not a lot of trouble apart from the occasional tree that can mysteriously get in the way. But it's the lovely movement, twists and turns and gradual rise and fall that keep you engaged. You could play this course again and again and never get bored!

There are lots of magical holes but the 15th and 16th spring most readily to mind, the 15th a par 3 involving a wide lake that takes at least a hybrid to cross. My favourite though is the 16th where, on this occasion, a tree blocked progress asking for a big fade/slice onto the picturesque green. Why is it those kind of 'flooky' shots

stick so well in the memory?

As per the North, the South has been here for 50 years but, like the entire resort, it's only gotten better with age and the recent refurb has ensured it's 'still game' after all these years. QDL got lucky with timing when they planned to carry out significant improvements throughout the resort. Along came the pandemic and most of the work was done during their downtime.

LARANJAL

Laranjal, QDL's third and youngest course, is completely different from the other two. It's located five kilometres from the resort and was actually an orange grove with a few citrus trees still dotting the periphery. There's zesty movement throughout this delightful track and a fair few water hazards to add to the mix.

Looking at the scorecard, you realise they did an imaginative job with the limited land available. The course works in two loops but you don't notice it. It seems to change direction continuously, offering a completely different angle and set of circumstances on every hole.

We were the first group out in the morning, playing with the ducks and moorhens and sped around in less than four hours. The conditions are pristine. This is the only one of the three courses that you could comfortably walk.

An interesting feature is the greenside aprons which force you to fly all the way onto the green no matter how far out you are. And there are a lot of greens with false fronts so, although it's not a difficult course, it's the approaches that make it all the more challenging.

The biggest drama is reserved for the last. The



WOW, RIGHT?

From top to bottom: The eighth hole on the North; the view from the tee of No.1 on the South; another green on the South surrounded by pines; this time the fourth hole; and, inset, our man David J Whyte teeing off.



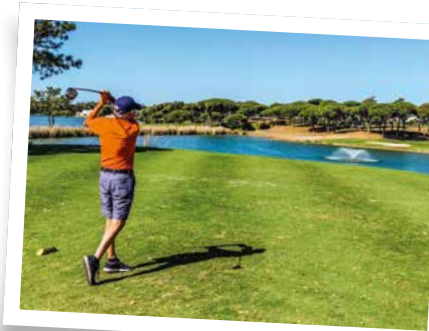
18th is a twisted dog-leg that winds between two large lakes. It's a lengthy par 5 so you could break it down but any element of 'going for it' brings the water into play.

I could easily say that Laranjal is my favourite of the three as it's so different from the others but sorry, the top slot has to go to the South although Laranjal is a fabulous addition!

THE CAMPUS

I'm not exactly the sporty type but we did take a spin around the Campus, QDL's latest addition and I considered, if only momentarily, even I could get into doing a bit of training. The Campus brings all sorts of activities into play and has put the pep back into Quinta do Lago. Padel's perennially popular, tennis too. Kids

have all sorts of camps for football, rugby, tennis and golf while professional teams show up for winter training. Their motto here is 'Be Elite, Whatever Your Level'.



PERSONALITY CULT

Quinta do Lago has long been popular with soccer celebs such as Frank Lampard, Michael Owen and Alan Shearer. Dragons' Den star Peter Jones owns a villa while Chris Evans and Holly

Willoughby are regulars. The addition of the new Campus sports facility seems to attract younger athletes so if you're going to put your considerable wages into real estate, QDL is the place to do it!

HOLIDAY LIFE

Some of the villas overlooking the golf courses are simply outstanding as is no doubt their cost. We took a look at apartments for rent at around €600 per night. I used to get an entire holiday for that! It's the mix though of high-end residents and opposite-end 'normies' that makes Quinta do Lago such a great, all-round destination.

WHERE TO EAT

There are no less than 14 restaurants within the estate and they cover just about

every type of dish you could wish for. We met at Bovino Steakhouse initially with João Carraco, the in-house mixologist kicking us off with a super citrusy concoction. The meat was excellent.

Casa do Lago al fresco restaurant provides a delightful lakeside setting for fresh seafood, salads and grilled meats.

Next we tried Umami, the 13th restaurant in Quinta do Lago and definitely lucky for diners presenting refined robatayaki Asian cuisine with quality fish, meat and vegetables slow-grilled over oak wood. You can have sushi and sashimi accompanied by Sake-infused cocktails and appetisers.

WHEN TO COME

Please note, the months of May and October are busy with groups, not necessarily from QDL but from the surrounding areas of Vilamoura eager to sample arguably the best courses in the area.

SEAL THE DEAL

QDL isn't your typical Algarve golf getaway for visitors. Vilamoura and Western Algarve might suit better. But for those that want real quality in an impeccable environment with supreme golf, this is the one!

The Magnolia offers some good package prices with golf on the North and Laranjal but you need to add on at least two rounds on the South course to feel really satisfied. My ideal 5-day getaway with four rounds would be North and Laranjal along with two on the South to truly savour one of the best courses on the Algarve, nay all of Europe!

To read about more of David's adventures in golf, visit linksland.com.