

SETTING THE PACE

A bucket-list trip to Omeya Golf Club has turned curiosity into a thirst for more. By Wade Pretorius

If you haven't been to Omeya, you need to start planning. If you have been, you'll no doubt be planning a return trip, probably a longer one than your previous stay. That's my experience, anyway, but let's rewind to the beginning to explain.

For as long as I've played golf, I've had a constant desire to play the kind of courses that regularly feature on TV, in magazines and, these days, on your social media timelines. It's become a case of the further away, the better.

I'm not the only one who was intrigued by 'the emerald jewel of Namibia', because on this trip I was part of a select group of first-timers to the 'oasis of verdant green in the arid wild of Namibia's acacia savannah'. The picture having been well painted, it

was now time to experience the pace that our northern neighbours thrive on. Like me, rookie Neels van Jaarsveld - the South African actor for whom 'met eish' became his trademark - was sold by what he'd seen online.

Former Proteas spinner Paul Harris was eager to make the trip after being alerted to Omeya's beauty by former teammate Mark Boucher.

'Bouchie was on our golf tour and was telling me about this epic course in Namibia. I trust him and did everything I could to get my name on the list to support the Omeya Golf Day to experience golf in Namibia,' says Harris.

Van Jaarsveld and Harris were among the stars gathered for the highlight of the club's calendar: a lavish outing to raise funds that will boost their reserves and improve their already impressive set-up.

The mainstays of the event were Jacques Kallis and, of course, Boucher. Both are extremely competitive amateur golfers who enjoy the luxury of having played not only South Africa's best courses, but also some of the finest around the world. If Kallis and Boucher clear their schedule to spend a few days at Omeya, you know it's going to be worth it. Completing the celebrity contingent were recent Sunshine Tour winner Neil Schietekat and former pro-turned-coach Grant Veenstra, who runs a successful academy out of Ebotse.

All six were lured to Namibia for the weekend by general manager Dan Zwiebel, who has used his years of experience in the golf industry to solidify and improve Omeya's reputation as arguably the finest facility in the country.

The beauty of Namibia - beyond its bushveld, mountains, dry rivers and



IMAGES: GRANT LEVENSMA/SUPPLIED



camelthorn trees which supplement the breathtaking views, enhanced by the magnificent sunrises and sunsets – is the proximity to South Africa. After a short flight into Windhoek and a 30km drive to the estate, you have arrived at a golfing destination that will rival any on the continent.

The Omeya team will no doubt immediately take you from your daily stressed life to complete relaxation, with the casual setting of the 19th hole establishing the tone for your stay.

SHOW ME YOUR FUNNY

The hugely successful Omeya Golf Day ended with a dinner and auction of memorabilia from athletics star Wayde van Niekerk, former Masters champion Charl Schwartzel and cricket icon AB de Villiers complementing items put up by Kallis, Boucher and Harris. The entertainment was capped by a standup comedy performance by Schalk Bezuidenhout, who also hilariously added his 'expertise' to the auction. Bezuidenhout's golfing prowess is unknown at this stage but those in attendance will be begging the organisers for a 'second round' of his show sooner rather than later.



The first feature hole is the par-three 4th, the start of a beautiful stretch of holes, which looks as intimidating as it plays

The course – a masterpiece by celebrated designer Peter Matkovich – incorporates the best the landscape has to offer with the natural vegetation being celebrated at every turn. Thick, wispy rough and a number of well-placed bunkers demand accuracy off the tee and some clever thinking when approaching the greens.

Hyperboles aside, the putting surfaces are quick and pure and will leave an impression long after you have returned to your local course. Established in 2013, the greens have grown into themselves and settled into glorious surfaces with subtle breaks and undulations that will test your nerve whenever you leave yourself above the hole.

The Omeya Golf Day is well-supported, not only by the players – the 2018 event was sold out in just 10 days – but also by local businesses and members to ensure there are enough memories to last until the next year.

The course offers a test no matter the season, with summer presenting lush fairways and immaculate greens offsetting the natural hues and soft landing areas, and winter golf allowing shorter hitters to benefit from the extended rollout to shorten the course. A shorter Omeya is by no means an easier Omeya with the slick greens – as true and with the summer shade maintained – usually guarded by bunkers and increased wind

speeds to test your placement off the tee and all-round iron game.

The first feature hole is the par-three 4th, the start of a beautiful stretch of holes, which looks as intimidating as it plays. A long, narrow green, which still makes space for a 'valley of sin' in the middle, is a virtual island in the large bunker that envelopes it. To make matters more interesting, the hole can play as short as





80m for the ladies and over 200m - and then some - from the championship tee. Factor in a head or cross wind and you can see why par is to be celebrated and birdie marvelled at.

The 5th offers risk and reward as it measures in the region of 260m from the club tee. The danger? A large, wasteland bunker that offers only the tiniest of inlets to the centre of the green, with the flag often well-positioned to test those who opt to lay up. After a few rounds played, you might find that the driver off the tee leaves you with the best opportunity for birdie - that's if your bunker play is up to standard.

A good drive at the 6th - the stroke-six par four - is not even half the equation solved. Experience will teach you the way to a pin that is housed on a large green, which locals will tell you always slopes in a certain direction. It is surrounded by indigenous trees that close in on the hole to create a magnificent rustic, colosseum-like effect. A two-putt is to be commended before the inviting second par three of the nine awaits.

At just 125m from the club tee, the danger on the right - a dry river bed - is brought into play only by those who know how hard par is if you miss in the valley to the left. One of the most intricate greens on the course, the pin can be placed in a number of positions to work the nerves as you make your way to the back nine. Before the turn, the 8th is your real chance of birdie as any drive out of danger will allow you a mid-iron and chip on to the green. The 9th is difficult as the fairway narrows significantly towards the landing area with another long green waiting to test your technique.

If the front nine is about the vast number of bunkers that come into play, the back nine features camelthorn trees on almost every hole. The first four holes will decide your round with stroke five, nine, three and

seven starting your run to the clubhouse and its vast varieties of refreshments.

The 11th - a proper three-shot par five if ever there was one - is a golf hole to remember. My trip saw terror and triumph on this 560m monster and it's the kind of hole you want every course to include as its challenges test the makeup of your game. The next stretch of admirable holes starts at the 15th all the way in as Matkovich's design comes to life. The par-five 15th is stroked at 13 and - the cliché is unavoidable - it's a hole that proved lucky for some. The green is protected by a dry river which is a hazard to be avoided at all costs as a decent lie almost never presents itself.

Having ticked Omeya on my bucket list, I'll put playing the hole in a rare moment of rain as something even more special as the members tell me the river runs for a couple of hours only a few times

per season. That sight, looking on to the multiple-tiered green, must slow down pace of play.

The 15th green is the best and most difficult on the course as we played to a front pin location which brings the river into the equation. Going long, or on to the top sections, brings a three- or four-putt, even for the best flatstick operators out there.

The 16th jumps the river once more and only those in control of their driver should elect to drive the green - I played my round in fine company, with one of my playing partners holding the honour as the only player to have aced the 246m hole. The par-three 17th is a delight and as the awards on the tee box show, a real chance at pulling off the perfect swing.

The 18th finishes the course to perfection: it's a long par four, the hardest on the course, with the trees again in play down the right of the fairway. A long-iron to the green and two putts is the intended way to master the last but there is a bunker short and another tree on the right of the green ready to wreck your scripted ending.

As much as Omeya is about the golf, it's also about the people who play there. Perhaps they are aware of the gem that they are fortunate to experience regularly, or perhaps it's just their good nature coming to the fore, but the members of Omeya are possibly the friendliest you will ever meet.

Namibia is full of tourist attractions - land, sand, sky and even water activities - but as a golfer, your first priority should be the drive from Windhoek's airport.

If you've been before, you'll know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, the course should be near the top of your to-play list. You'll go for the golf and return for the friends you've made. ☺

A WAY OF LIFE

Omeya Golf and Residential Oasis is a home- and life-based offering with varied levels of accommodation to suit families at every stage of life. Nearly 200 houses have already been built to go with a number of townhouse complexes, a retirement village and even a care centre on site. A business centre and a school all form part of the lifestyle for families looking to take advantage of the slower pace. Golf rates are lower for home owners and junior members.



IMAGES SUPPLIED/GRAHAM LEVENSIA