

NATURAL BEAUTY

From its inception to its latest developments, Pacific Dunes has flourished with a close connection to the environment in which it sits.

By Tony Webeck

THE great irony of the natural bush setting that now greets visitors to Pacific Dunes in the Port Stephens region of New South Wales is that it was in many respects a manufactured ecosystem to begin with.

Twelve years have passed since the James Wilcher design welcomed its first golfers and immediately announced itself as a layout of high regard, currently sitting at No.54 in our most recent ranking of the Top 100 Courses in the land. The distinctive nature of Pacific Dunes is that the front nine plays through a quintessentially Australian bushland backdrop while the back nine boasts a more open feel with interconnecting waterways that threaten danger at almost every turn.

As soon as you take a turn to the left after your drive at the 331-metre par 4 first hole, you are invited to step into an Aussie oasis. But that is hardly the setting that welcomed Wilcher in his initial site visits more than a decade ago.

“It was a semi-cleared, semi-rehabilitated, partially open paddock,” Wilcher tells AUSTRALIAN GOLF DIGEST of his initial impressions. “It was a remediated old rutile mine and so they’d done a lot of planting of native species and we cut the fairways through that.”

THE FOLIAGE-HEAVY FRONT NINE OFFERS A DISTINCT CONTRAST TO THE OPEN, WATER-LADEN INWARD HALF.



THE CHALLENGES ARE OBVIOUS AT THE DOGLEC-LEFT, PAR-4 16TH.

But that's not to say that Wilcher didn't see great potential. He didn't have wild dunes from which to bounce off, a cliff-top vista on which to perch a green or elevated tees boasting views into the distance. But he was adamant he had enough of the characteristics shared by some of the best courses in the world to create something memorable.

"If you think of all the great golf courses in the world, do they have water? No," Wilcher argues. "Do they have an ocean backdrop? No. Do they have a mountainous backdrop? No. What they have is an attractive, wonderfully simple landscape. We had an attractive, wonderfully simplistic landscape palate and backdrop to work with.

"From a design perspective, you obviously put in the golf element, and integrating the landscape palate into that was the most rewarding part of the project. I'd be lying to say there were obvious golf holes there at all. It was pretty much manufactured out of the swamp. What we were able to do was to harness the best of the vegetation. There were some really gorgeous old Angophoras around the place that we left. We tried to put greens in beside them and tees in beside them and the rest we really manufactured."

The sensitive nature of the vegetation throughout the front nine has meant it has had to remain untouched since the course opened, while the low-lying land found on the back nine was used to generate the

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water storage necessary to limit water consumption.

Being an environmentally sensitive and sustainable property has been at the forefront of the Pacific Dunes development since inception and has carried through to its most recent addition. The Pacific Dunes Country Club and The Green House Eatery found within has become a thriving hub for not only golfers and residents but also members of the surrounding community.

In addition to the sourcing of as much fresh produce from the region as possible for the range of dining options available at The Green House, the building itself was constructed in such a way as to work with the environment rather than against it.

"A lot of thought went into the initial build of the golf course and the country club has complemented that," says Pacific Dunes' general manager of golf operations Kurt Linde of the conscious decision to be a sustainable property.

"The bushland on the front nine is lovely and then on the back nine we have all the interconnecting waterways that link back to our irrigation dam, so there's a sustainability there in terms of the water that we use. In the country club itself we have geo-thermal heating to keep the electricity costs down with regards to air-conditioning and also the heating of the pool. And we have 125 solar panels on the roof with a 30-kilowatt inverter to not only ensure we keep electricity costs in check but lessen any carbon footprint that we might make. That aspect to the country club really complements what we have throughout the golf course."

With a welcoming atmosphere and new menu in the works, Pacific Dunes has quickly become one of the most sought-after venues in the Hunter region for functions, corporate events and charity days. And the good news for golfers is the condition of the course is as good as it has ever been.

A PUTTER'S PARADISE

From the day it opened, Pacific Dunes boasted some of the purest putting surfaces you could ever hope to find.

The memory of the roll they gave more than 10 years ago remains as clearly etched in my brain as it did the day we first played there. Such was the roll that it made you feel as though you could challenge Ben Crenshaw, Tiger Woods and Bobby Locke to a putting competition and fancy your chances. They were so incredibly good that you felt like it was next to impossible to hit a bad putt and, somewhat to the surprise of Wilcher, it is a quality that has remained a feature of Pacific Dunes all these years later.

Whether it was through good luck, good management or indeed a combination of both, the greens at Pacific Dunes remain as pure as the day they were laid.

"I would have expected them to go off a little bit by now but they haven't," Wilcher explains. "The first greenkeeper really focused his attention on making sure he kept the poa out and the greens in good nick. We had a few issues with some of them in terms of drainage early on because it was flood-prone and we used native sand on site like the 'old school' might have, but they have always managed to keep the poa out of them."

Wilcher is responsible for The Cut in Western Australia and work at elite Sydney courses such as Elanora and Cromer, but with plans to take a group of friends back to Pacific Dunes in October, you sense it holds a special place in his heart.

"I've found that of all the projects that I've worked on, it's somewhat the most gratifying simply because it influences people's lives every day," Wilcher says. "Drive in the gates there and there is just a special feeling about the place. The entry statement was well done and there is a great sense of arrival into that place, whether it be for the golf or the housing. To watch people walking their dogs and living their lives because of this development is a really nice thing to see.

"There are a whole host of holes that are really gorgeous to the eye and play nicely. There are some really interesting par 3s there of varying lengths, which I think is important, and the stretch of holes of two, three, four, five and six are all outstanding golf holes. And the finish is very strong.

"I'm most proud of the fact that it's still in good nick; that it's still a good golf course. It's nice on the eye and it's much better than an average golf course you'd play in Sydney. Much better." 📍

THE DETAILS

Pacific Dunes Golf Club

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OPTIONS APLENTY AWAIT ON THE SHORT PAR-4 THIRD HOLE.