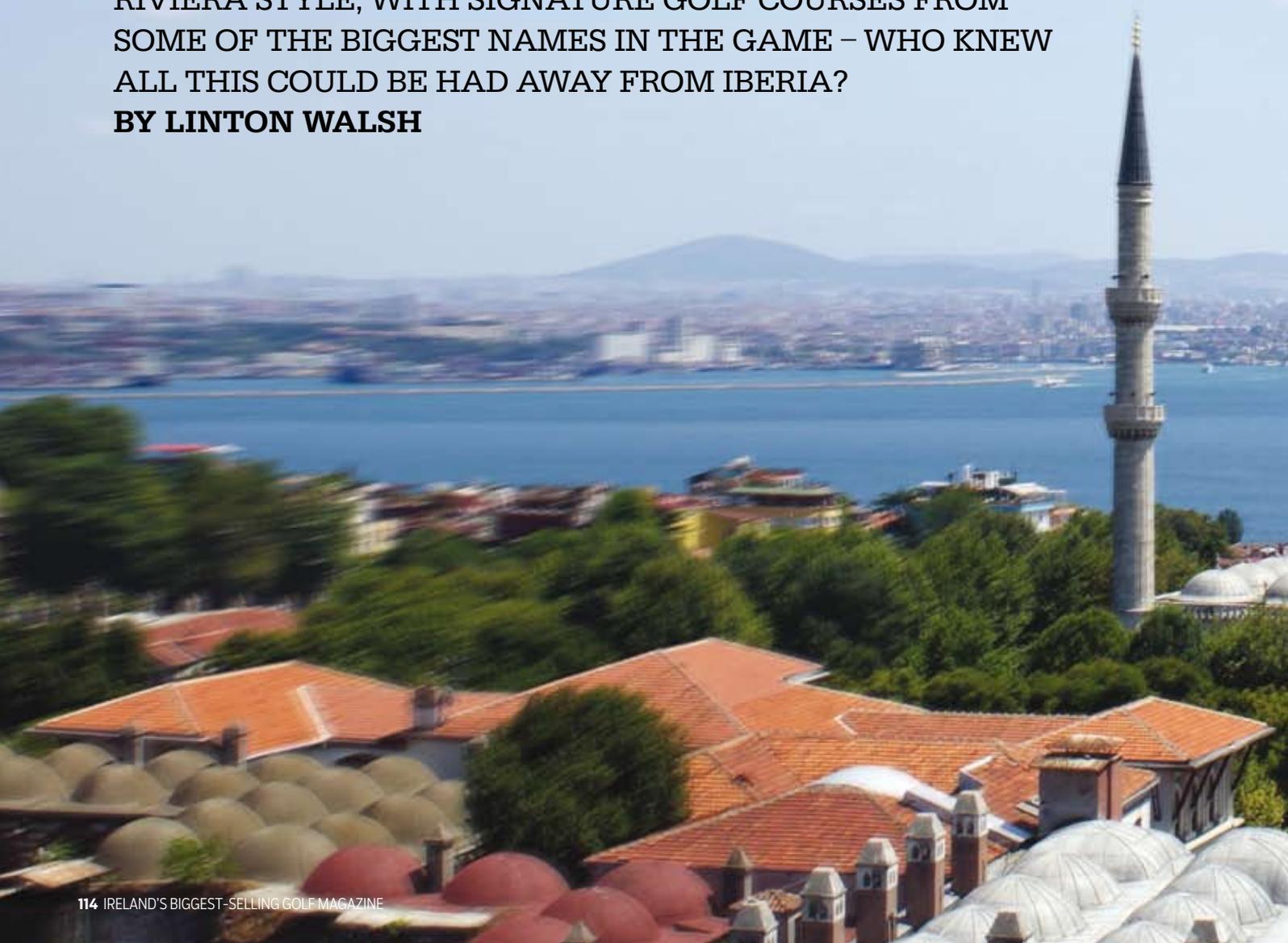


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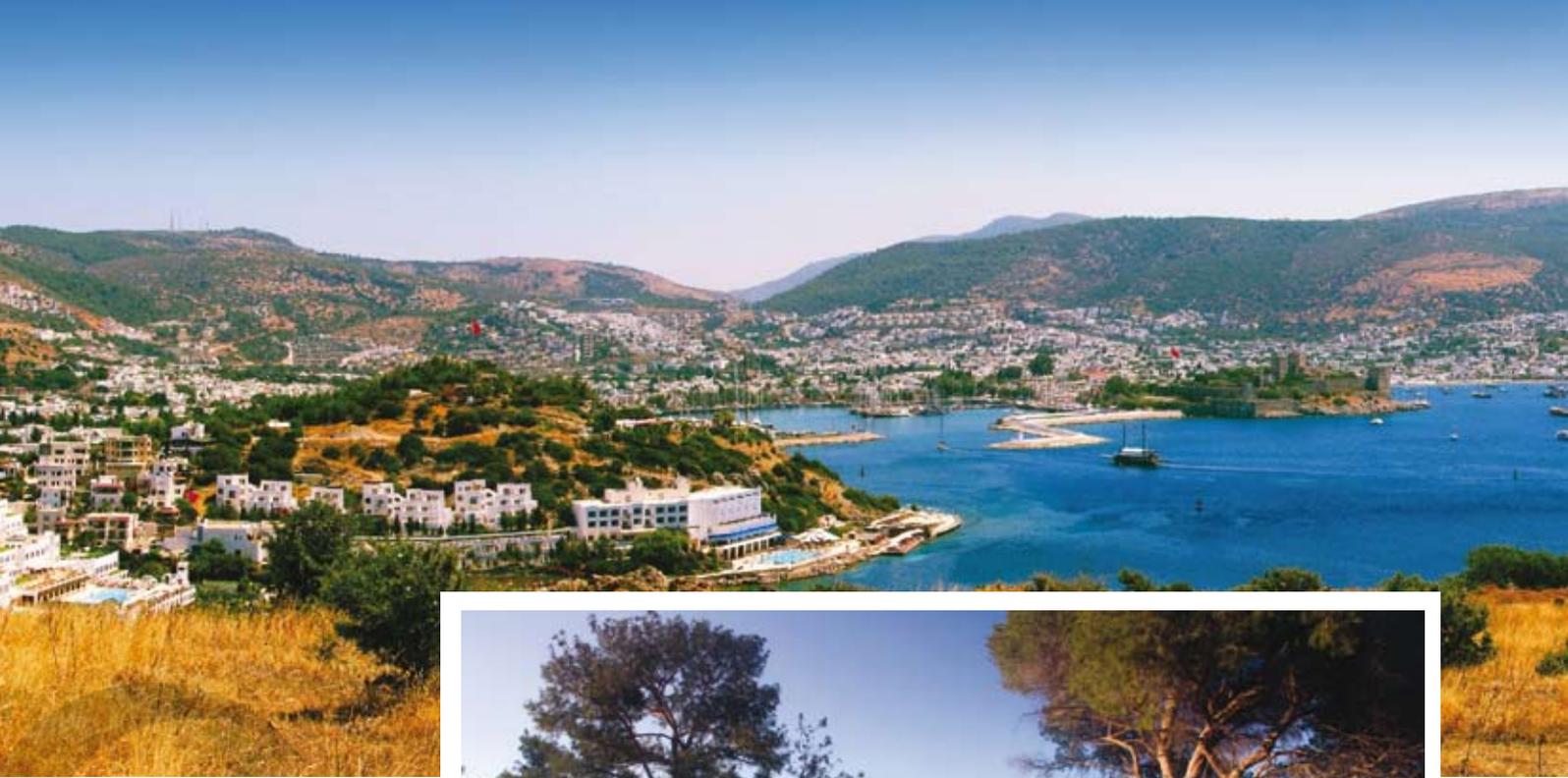


ENDLESS SUNSHINE, OPULENT FIVE STAR RESORTS AND RIVIERA STYLE, WITH SIGNATURE GOLF COURSES FROM SOME OF THE BIGGEST NAMES IN THE GAME – WHO KNEW ALL THIS COULD BE HAD AWAY FROM IBERIA?
BY LINTON WALSH



KEY





Few countries in the world can compete with Turkey when it comes to history and culture, but as a golf destination, it's not a spot on the map that most Irish golfers would instantly think of. I should know – I was one of them. Until recently, that is. Now, having seen all it has to offer, it seems to me to be among the most natural choices any travelling hacker could make.

When you write about golf, travel is something you become accustomed to. Which is why it never fails to surprise me that I can still be surprised – and impressed – when a “new” destination comes around. A recent visit to the fairways of Turkey was one such moment of wonder.

As I have never been to Turkey before, I wanted to combine a city break to their amazing capital city and a golf holiday to, what turned out to be, one of the best golf destinations I have ever been to. But it was to the golf first.

On the Turkish Riviera, the town of Belek has developed in recent years into the focal point of Turkish golf, and so makes the most obvious choice when it comes to choosing a region. With 300 days of sunshine a year, and an average temperature of 25 degrees, it couldn't be better suited to golf.

One of the region's finest and best-known hotels (only the best for yours truly), the



Gloria Hotel & Resort



Carya Golf Club



The Montgomerie Maxx Royal

Gloria Hotel & Resort, was home-away-from-home for the duration of the stay. Boasting a 45-hole golf club comprised of two 18-holers – the Old and the New – and the 9-hole Verde course, its the largest golf complex in the country. The five-star hotel offers everything you'd expect, and in terms of comfort, dining and leisure facilities, will no doubt exceed many expectations.

The Old Course (18 holes, Par 72, 6,181m) has hosted several European Tour events and has been a favourite with

golfers since it opened in 1997. Set amongst beautiful pine trees, over an area of almost 80 hectares with seven freshwater lakes and 63 bunkers it really is a true test of golf.

Similar in challenge if not in approach, the more modern New Course (18 holes, Par 72, 6,239m) opened in 2005, with a memorable signature 17th hole modelled on the infamous 17th at TPC Sawgrass. This, and the lake-lined 18th hole, combine to create a finish as memorable as any course you're likely to play.

The Verde (9 holes, Par 36,

2,926m) is obviously a shorter track, but set in a 45-hectare patch with two large lakes and 28 bunkers, is hardly lacking. Opened in 2001, it's been rated as one of the best 9-hole courses in Europe, which is easy to understand. The course is extensively used as a teaching facility and is open to players without handicaps at selected times, making it the perfect place to try and convert a non-playing partner, or give some parental guidance to any youngsters looking to take up the game.



Speaking of which, the onsite Gloria Golf Academy is generally considered to be the leading teaching centre in Turkey, and with its purpose-built facility, the very latest video analysis equipment and clubs from Nike and TaylorMade, it makes a great option for any family or friends just finding their feet in the world of golf, or even for the seasoned player who's lost their way. The range and practice areas are the largest in Turkey, so even if you're just looking to brush up before a round, you're well catered for.

In keeping with this five-star form, the clubhouse and the resort's spa are both top-class, and provide two perfect ways to unwind after your round.

"How have I not been here before?" was among the thoughts that sprung to mind once I'd explored all the resort had to offer. But there's plenty outside Gloria's gates, too. Golfers in Belek are spoiled, because of the proximity in which all of the courses are placed. Once you arrive, there's no time wasted in hotel transfers, and the only long drives you'll be thinking about will be on the par-5s.

I was struck by how many of the courses in the region would rank alongside the most famous in Ireland, both in terms of design and presentation. There wasn't a blade of grass out of place wherever I went, which thanks to the cluster of clubs close-by, included a few 36-hole days. And as for design, well Greg Norman is contracted to re-work some of the holes at Gloria, and both Colin Montgomerie and Nick Faldo have stunning layouts already open around Belek.

Monty's course at the Maxx Royal Golf Club is a stunner, and every bit as memorable as the Scot's designs at Carton House and indeed Celtic Manor. At just under 6,500 metres, it's a real test, and right from the par-5 first should give your skills a thorough examination. The course fits nicely with the local landscape, and incorporates much of the sites original features, including a wealth of indigenous trees

A FANTASTIC CITY BREAK TO ISTANBUL

I flew into Istanbul on my way to Belek and was very much looking forward to spending a couple of days there on my return. Firstly, let me say flying Turkish Airlines is a very pleasant surprise. Unlike a certain blue-and-yellow nightmare that has become what most of us now consider the norm in terms of air travel, the Turkish national carrier is wonderfully old fashioned. I don't mean technology-wise, I mean in how it views its passengers.

Remember when your chair wasn't crushing you forwards at an acute angle, and your in-flight drink didn't come in a plastic baggy? I do, just about. Travelling to Istanbul was like going back in time, with free food and beverages provided by polite, well-presented staff in comfortable surroundings.

And what's more, your faithful correspondent had been silly enough to lend out his golf travel bag some time in the past, and couldn't remember who to blame in time for the flight. As a result, I turned up in Dublin Airport with nothing more than the rain hood and the woolly headcovers to protect my beloved bats. That they arrived in Belek safe and sound is surely the highest recommendation any golfer could give to an airline.

Another great service is that provided by golfturkey.com, who specialise in designing golf holidays tailored to meet all your needs needs at surprisingly affordable prices. Once you step off the aeroplane, Golf Turkey take care of everything; from airport transfer to hotel accommodations to tee-off time, ensuring that everything runs according to plan and that there are no disappointments or unpleasant surprises to ruin your holiday.

There's a connecting flight through Istanbul; there's nothing you can do about that, but then, there are worse cities in the world to be diverted through, which leads me on to my thoroughly-positive – and I think, very clever – suggestion: cram two holidays into one.

The internal flight is a doddle, so don't think of it as an obstacle, think of it as an opportunity to arrange to spend a few days in one of the world's most enchanting cities, before or after you head to the coast to tee it up. After all, Istanbul is attracting all kinds of visitors in their droves right now, and with good reason.

This city of more than 13 million souls is one of the hottest destinations in the world, with buzzing fashion, cultural and social scenes that should impress even the most seasoned traveller. And let's not forget about the food, which I think would be reason enough to visit on its own, or the history; after all, Istanbul was once the capital of the Roman, Byzantine, Latin and Ottoman empires and is Europe's biggest city. Istanbul historically known as Byzantium and Constantinople. It is located on the Bosphorus Strait and encompasses the natural harbour known as the Golden Horn, in the northwest of the country. It extends both on the European and on the Asian sides of the Bosphorus, and is thereby the only metropolis in the world that is situated on two continents.

Thereafter, the new Republic of Turkey, moved their capital to Ankara during the Turkish War of Independence. Istanbul was chosen as a European Capital of Culture for 2010 and European Capital of Sports for 2012.

A highlight of my city break guided tour of The Topkapı Palace which was the official and primary residence of the Ottoman Sultans, for approximately 400 years of their 624-year reign



The palace was a setting for state occasions and royal entertainments and is a major tourist attraction today, containing the most holy relics of the Muslim world such as the Prophet Muhammed's cloak and sword.

The palace is full of examples of Ottoman architecture and also contains large collections of porcelain, robes, weapons, shields, armor, Ottoman miniatures, Islamic calligraphic manuscripts and murals, as well as a display of Ottoman treasure and jewelry.

Another place which is definitely worth a visit is the Sultan Ahmed Mosque which is one of the most famous religious buildings of the world. The mosque is also known as the Blue Mosque for the blue tiles adorning the walls of its interior.

The Blue Mosque was commissioned by Sultan Ahmet I. Construction began in 1609 and took 7 years. Sultan Ahmet died only a year after the completion of his masterpiece, at the age of 27 and he is buried just outside the Blue Mosque with his wife and 3 sons.

Interestingly, The Blue Mosque is one of the two mosques in Turkey that has six minarets. Each of these fluted, pencil-shaped minarets has 3 balconies, while the two others at the end of the forecourt only have 2 balconies.

There is an interesting story of the Blue Mosque. According to story, Sultan Ahmet I wanted to have a minaret made of gold which is altin in Turkish. The architect misunderstood Sultan Ahmet as alti which means six in English. However, when the architect was shivering as "am I going to be beheaded?"; Sultan Ahmed said "I liked minarets very much". Prior to that time, no sultan had a mosque with six minarets.

Nowadays there are more trendy bars, eateries, galleries and clubs around town than there are historical treasures – and that's saying something. I read somewhere once that Istanbul is known as the "City of the World's Desire"; and I can see why.

Looking back on it now, it couldn't have provided a better contrast – and compliment – to my few days spent relaxing by the coast and chasing after golf balls. The invigorating energy of the city provided the perfect jolt I needed to come back revived and recharged after chilling out in Belek had washed away my old worries. And after all, isn't that exactly what holidays should be about?



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For all golf information and hotels visit www.golfturkey.com



Cornelia Golf Club



Tat Golf Club



Antalya Golf Club

subsidiary of the PGA European Tour, so you know it has to be good. The Pasha is perhaps the most open of all the courses found in Belek, but there are still enough bunkers and water hazards to oblige golfers of all abilities to concentrate hard on the task in hand. Its undulating greens are larger than the average and a deft putting touch is essential.

The PGA Sultan is a fair but stern challenge, worthy of hosting the Eisenhower Trophy, arguably the most prestigious team event in men's amateur golf. Rolling fairways, a dozen water hazards and nearly 100 sand traps, including numerous pot bunkers, give the PGA Sultan the best of both worlds when comparison is made with traditional links and modern, American-style courses. Whereas the Pasha's fairways are generally wide and its undulating Bermuda greens larger than average, targets at the PGA Sultan are much tighter. Right from the start, it's a handful, but an enjoyable one.

The oldest course in the region owes something to these shores, as it was designed by Northern Ireland's one-time golfer and now TV-personality David Feherty. The former Ryder Cup star co-designed the course at the National Golf Club in 1994, and a golf destination was born. Once swampland, the area's been transformed into a rolling course, thanks to draining that takes the water into lakes, which butt on to

six holes. They've managed to retain most of the characteristic pine and eucalyptus trees, and by making full use of the Taurus Mountains backdrop, it's a fantastic play to enjoy a game

Other tracks in the region worthy of mention include the Carya Golf Club, with its Peter Thomson-designed gem that's draped in heather; Peter Dye's imaginative creation at Lykia Links Golf Club where you can experience a Riviera links course and where the wind can make a huge difference; the Tat Golf Club, which apparently means "taste" in Turkish, has three loops of nine with lush fairways and views of the mediterranean; the Kaya Eagles Golf Club, which took five years to build and features some imposing water features; the Robinson Golf Club, a firm favourite with the tourists I spoke to laid out in a rural, wooded-style parkland; and the Sueno Golf Club, where the sweeping dunes, picturesque views and island greens should live long in the memory.

Most if not all of these resorts have more bars and restaurants in them than you could realistically get through on a holiday, so once you're there you won't have to worry about entertainment of being watered and fed. Other than skipping over to one of the nearby clubs for a round, there's little reason to leave the resort, unless you want to. Another plus is that most packages for the resorts in Belek include food and drink – happy days.

and naturally occurring sand features.

Likewise, Cornelia Golf Club's Faldo Course is every inch the championship track that you'd expect from such a high-profile designer. Every centimetre of it feels like it's there on purpose, which I suppose, given the designer, shouldn't surprise. The six-time major winner impressed a lot of people in Ireland with his layout in Lough Erne, and after visiting Cornelia, I can say that his Irish course wasn't a one-off. This beauty is built on either side of a ridge of sand dunes, and winds through a colony of umbrella pines and – again, typically for a Faldo design – has several doglegs that place more of an emphasis on strategic acumen than brute force. Factor

in elevated tees, tight driving holes, numerous beautiful but treacherous lakes, along with par-fives that are genuine three-shotters, and it becomes obvious that patience as well as skill is required to construct a decent score here. Laid out in three loops of nine, the possible combinations mean that this is one club that really requires two visits to get a real sense of it.

Another course that demands at least two rounds is the Antalya Golf Club – home of two 18-hole courses and host to next year's Eisenhower Trophy. The club's fist course, the Pasha, opened at the end 2002 and has been wowing locals and tourists alike ever since. The PGA Sultan was added the year after, and like its sister, was constructed by European Golf Design, a