

# WEST COAST GOLF

**If we're honest, most South Africans think west coast golf starts at Milnerton and ends at Atlantic Beach. But while pickings are slim on the road to Namibia, the links at Shelley Point shouldn't be as little-known as it is.**

*Text: Richard Asher / Photos: Shelley Point*

**YOU CAN GO STRAIGHT FROM THE POOL TO THE FIRST TEE - AND BACK AGAIN!**



MOODY SKIES ARE AN ESSENTIAL FEATURE OF ANY JOURNEY TO THE WEST COAST



SHELLEY POINT BEARS A PASSING RESEMBLANCE TO THE LINKS AT ST ANDREWS

# FORGETTING YOUR SAND WEDGE WOULD BE A DISASTER

and you're surrounded by sea on three sides. You won't see the ocean much...but then you could say the same of the St Andrews Old Course!

Shelley Point is ninety minutes north of Cape Town, just a little way past Vredenburg and Paternoster. That makes it a pretty good stopover if you're taking a leisurely trip up to Namibia. Especially if you've packed the golf clubs – it really is a golfing wasteland north of here.

## PALM TREES GIVE THE LINKS A TROPICAL FLAVOUR



History turns on the smallest things. Change a couple of miniscule facts, and you'd have to rewrite all the books. For example, imagine if Vasco da Gama had been a keen golfer. He might never have found his way to the spice riches of India!

Let me explain. The great Portuguese explorer, whose mission it was to find a sea route to East Asia, apparently hit the South African coast at Shelley Point in 1497. Had he been a Scot, he might well have recognised the peninsula for the superb links golf opportunity that it is. And he'd probably have stayed right there.

Five hundred and twelve years later, that links – not dissimilar to golf's most famous finger of land, St Andrews – is finally home to a course. Shelley Point Country Club won't be hosting big championships anytime soon, but that doesn't mean it's not agreeable. On the contrary, it's a must-play if you want to complete your collection of South African links courses. It definitely looks and feels like a links (if you ignore the palm trees),

There are two ways to approach Shelley Point. The first is via St Helena. Not the Atlantic island (unless you're a descendant of da Gama), but the village just east of Shelley Point, through which the roundabout asphalt route from Vredendal takes you. Better, though, is the perfectly passable gravel road that directly links Vredendal, Paternoster and Stompneusbaai, the home of Shelley Point. Here's where you can get a real feel for the rural grandeur of the west coast, while getting some advance practice for driving the gravelly cart paths at the golf club.

But take care not to run over any of the tortoises that love crossing roads in these parts. Driving over such a slow animal doesn't seem fair, and will make you feel terrible. What will lift your spirits, on the other hand, is the sight of Shelley Point and the deep blue Atlantic as you top a crest near the end of the undulating road. It'll make you want to get the clubs out right away.

If you discover you've left your driver at home, fear not. This is one course where you can leave your big stick in the bag all day and still shoot level par. The only reason you'd ever need driver is if you've got a fixation with reaching the par-five ninth in two. And that's a big hurrah for us average golfers.

Shelley Point is a nine-holer and adds up to only 5554 metres, which makes it sound like another country goat track. It's not. In fact, the conditioning and thoughtful design make it a fair test of golf. For example, your average rural nine-holer does not feature holes with eight bunkers!

Bunkering is Shelley Point's primary defence, so forgetting your sand wedge definitely would be a disaster. They're not the vicious pots you'd find in Scotland, but the faces are steep enough to cause concern. The

traps will be looking you in the eye on just about every tee and approach shot, making club selection critical.

Most of the fairways are generous enough, and you've got to be a long way off target to go into the bush or out of bounds. Having said that, it's easy to roll into a fairway bunker, and a couple of tee shots are partly blind – so it takes a couple of rounds to learn the best strategy.

The wind can certainly blow on the west coast, but the layout is such that you should never face more than two holes into the teeth of a gale. The holes run every which way, with some substantial cart drives from one tee to the next. And what exhilarating drives they are if you're a budding rally driver – let's just say the local golf carts aren't immune to sliding around.

While the golf course has been around for a few years now and is definitely mature, Shelley Point is continuing to transform itself into a family-friendly holiday destination as well as the housing estate that was its original raison d'être. Earlier this year the Dale Capital Partners Group bought the hotel, country club and spa facility from developer Gert Joubert. Since then they've got Queensgate Hotel Management (whose portfolio includes the Radisson in Cape Town) in on the act, and right now they're busy doubling the size of the hotel in time for a little football tournament happening next winter.

The complex isn't huge in absolute terms, but it's certainly the largest thatched-roof building I've ever seen. And you needn't take my word that it's impressive: the Thatchers' Association of South Africa gave it their Most Aesthetic Roof prize in 2007! The new wing is being built in exactly the same style, so while construction makes things a little unsightly for the moment, all should look grand when complete.

One of the definite pluses is the compact nature of it the whole facility. Reception, the pro shop, the restaurant, pool, spa and wellness centre are all in one central building overlooking the first hole, and the hotel rooms are but ten steps away. You can throw away the car keys for as long as you're here. The restaurant, which boasts an enticing view, is also undergoing changes, with a new chef and menu on the way. Wines from Doolhof in Wellington feature prominently on the drinks list, with its Cape Loerie white blend a popular choice in this supremely chilled-out venue. Good old Nederburg's Cabernet Sauvignon also sells well at Shelley Point, which gets much of its hotel clientele from Cape Town.

Many of the home owners, on the other hand, are European. Just like da Gama, who can lay claim to both a museum and a larger-than-life statue at Shelley Point. You probably won't change the course of history by spending some time here on your own explorations, but then nobody's expecting you to discover any spice islands either...

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