



GOLFPUNK EXPERIENCE Anahita

Ernie Els has just given us golfers yet another reason to head for Mauritius. Turtles, castles and wide fairways make playing Anahita the purest of pleasures. **By Richard Asher**

Before I forget: you absolutely have to meet the giant snapping turtle. It'd be so easy to miss him as you wander off the ninth green. And to do that would be to miss one of Anahita's star attractions.

Okay, I didn't actually see him snap at anyone. And some zoologist will probably write in to tell me that he's a tortoise. But "giant snapping turtle" sounds so much better. And it's at least partly true: this guy is a real giant.

Easily as long as a three-iron and built like a wartime cement mixer, he lives in the stone-walled enclosure behind the ninth green. The beast can be cranky at times, especially if you wake him up to take a photograph – but who wouldn't be a bit of a grump at the age of 174?

He's one of the few things that they don't go out of their way to advertise at Ernie Els's first Mauritian design adventure.

But then, there is a great deal more to shout about than just the amusing wildlife. Ernie has really hit the mark with the Four Seasons Golf Club at Anahita. It's already a must-play on any golf trip to the Indian Ocean island: and that's not because it's the sort of vicious test that lies across the water on Île aux Cerfs.

On the contrary, Ernie obviously had a great deal of fun making this course, and anyone playing it will have a great deal of fun too. Where else are you given the opportunity to bounce your shot off a ruined fort in the middle of the fairway?

When your golf abilities are as ordinary as mine are, watching your ball land on a little castle can actually lift your spirits. Don't ask me why: there's just something amusing about it. Especially when you hear that Ernie pounded a drive right over it on his test round and declared that it wasn't in play. Alrighty then, big guy...

It's not just the house on 18 that tells you how much Els enjoyed moving the scattered volcanic rock about. Like a kid let loose in a pebble patch, he's gone and built walls all over the place. Which makes for tremendous fun. On both the second and the 14th holes, you've got every chance of knocking your drive into one of these rock barriers – and at the latter you may even end up playing your approach over one. When you're standing in the fairway and all you can see is a wall and the top of the pin, rest assured it's every bit as nerve-wracking as playing over a water hazard. And every bit as visually tasteful: Ireland keeps springing to mind.

"I've done so many courses and wanted to do some different stuff here," Ernie told us. "You want to get the golfer to come away talking about the course and remember a couple of the holes. Something must grab the player, whether it be the

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Off course

Although the course is fully open for play, and the place certainly doesn't look like a building site, there's still quite a lot of work to be done on the rest of the Anahita development over the next couple of years. The jewel in the crown will be the elaborate Four Seasons Resort, construction of which is

well under way. The Four Seasons more or less sits on an island, with its own beach and state-of-the-art spa facility. Expect luxury on an unbelievable scale.

Anahita is also a housing estate, naturally, and not only can you buy a place to live here but rent one too. Until the Four Seasons opens that's pretty much the



only option, but certainly not a bad one. The villas lining the ninth fairway have balconies big enough to play cricket on – sleeping out on one of these is a must, even if the birds chirp you out of your slumber far too early in the morning.

At La Place Belgath, the centre of the development, there's a

double infinity pool, a great bakery, wellness facility and the top-drawer Origine restaurant. The only drawback here is that the beach isn't much to shout about – but at least that provides motivation to get in the water and attempt a swim across to Île aux Cerfs. Just mind out for the boat traffic or you may become the centrepiece of a gory accident.



bunkering, the greens or whatever. Then you've done your job as a designer."

In that case Ernie's gone beyond the call of duty, because you remember more than a couple of holes when you leave Anahita. That's because they're all so different – and almost each of them has a distinct feature that stays in the mind.

At the first it's simply the fact that it's such a gentle opener. At two it's those walls and the horrid drop off the back of the green, while at four it's the long march towards a stunning seaside green that has both the wind and some fierce bunkering to protect it. At the sixth it's the greenside water hazard, at the seventh it's the multitude of bunkers in the fairway and the sheer nastiness of the green. At the delightful ninth it's the thought-provoking creek that gives you two very different options from the tee. And, having not missed the giant snapping turtle, it's the sudden appearance of palm trees that will grab you at ten.

Then there are the par threes. While an average golfer (trust me on this) can find the course quite playable from the markers just in front of the "Ernie Els tees", the exceptions can be found at the front nine's two short holes. Both are lengthy enough to make you weep as you reach for your longest club – escape these with par and you're doing well. The 17th is short, but a classic seaside hole with an outrageous green and an unfriendly breeze.

One thing that is fairly uniform about the place, though, is the generous fairways and largely open feel. Losing balls isn't going to be a major problem at Anahita – although there's a chance of knocking one into the Indian Ocean every time you tee it up at 18.

Because of the wide fairways and the very reachable par fives, the club's Aussie-educated pro Kevin Mohun is convinced Tour players would have this course for breakfast. He's probably right, but it is a resort course after all. And the likelihood of one of the big Tours visiting Mauritius seems remote.

In any case, the greens should be enough to keep most players honest. From close range they're tough to hold, and a couple of them are diabolical to putt on (7 and 17, we know where you live). In fact, Ernie admits he might have overdone it given that this is a course primarily for holiday golfers.

"Ja, some of the greens were almost a bit too severe and maybe we've got to look at that. It can get away from you in a couple of places but at least it doesn't run away too fast."

If there's one time that you really should run away fast, though, it's when you see the on-course refreshments trolley on the way. They don't mention the prices until you end your round – but rest assured that it's nothing short of daylight robbery. Use the same approach as you would for a heroin dealer: just say no.

Most importantly, though, the turtle viewing is free. 🐢