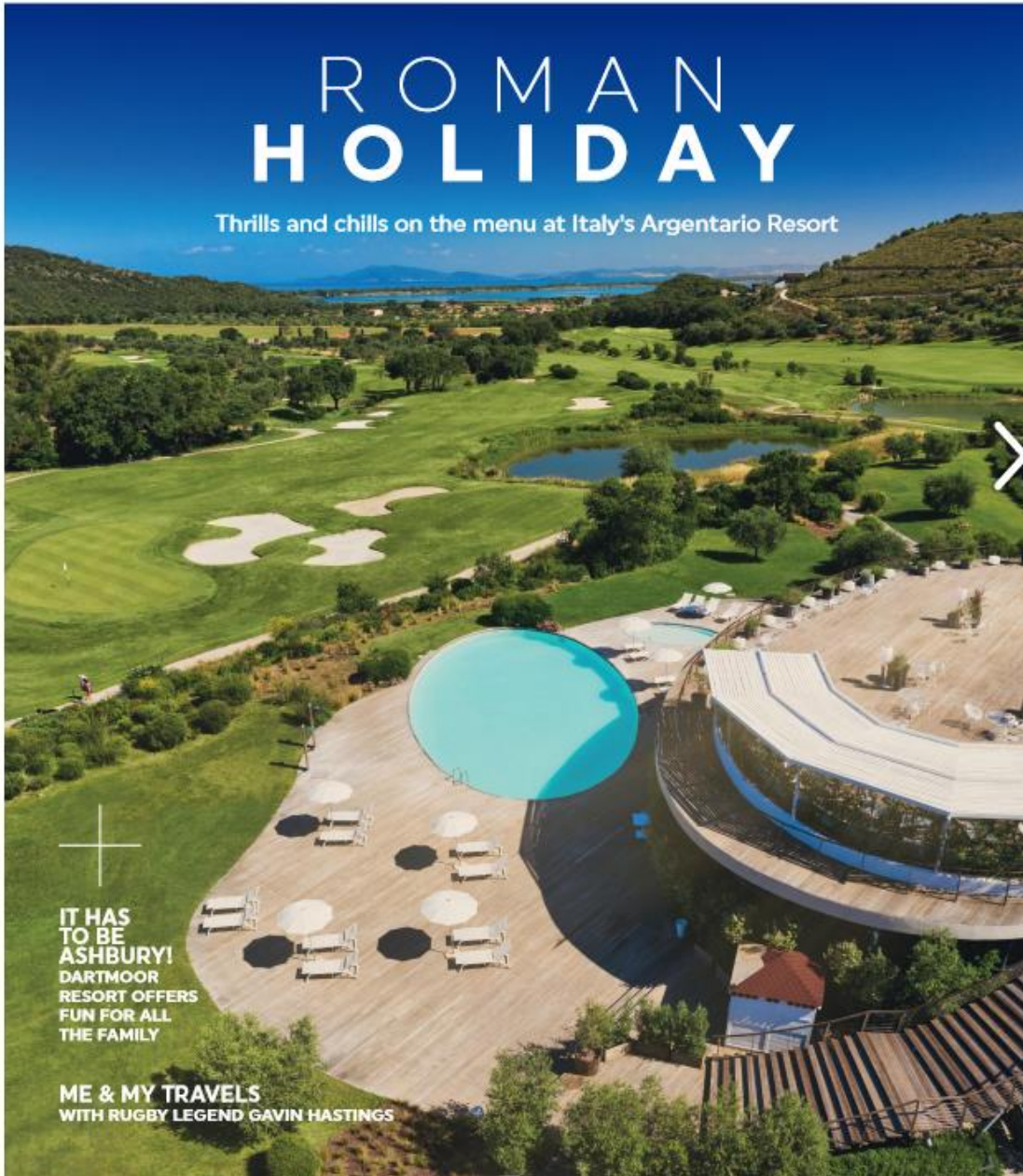


GOLF NEWS
TRAVEL & BREAKS

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ROMAN HOLIDAY

Thrills and chills on the menu at Italy's Argentario Resort

IT HAS
TO BE
ASHBURY!
DARTMOOR
RESORT OFFERS
FUN FOR ALL
THE FAMILY

ME & MY TRAVELS
WITH RUGBY LEGEND GAVIN HASTINGS

TUSCAN

Delights



Boasting Italy's only PGA National championship golf course and a luxury hotel and spa, Argentario Golf & Wellness Resort provides a relaxing retreat on Tuscany's unspoilt coastline, yet remains within striking distance of Rome's world-renowned attractions

WITH ALL EYES in the golfing world turning to Italy next year as host nation of the 2023 Ryder Cup, it seems like a good time to get in an early sighter of what is on offer for the visiting golfer when it comes to places to play and star before, during and perhaps after the biennial clash of continents takes place next September.

While the Ryder Cup matches are being held at Marco Simone Golf & Country Club in the north eastern suburbs of Rome, my trip took me slightly up country to a golf resort 90 miles north of Italy's capital that has been quietly building a reputation as a haven for Romans and overseas visitors looking for a bit of R&R amid olive grove-lined fairways since it first opened in 2006.

Argentario Golf & Wellness Resort – the 'wellness' element has recently been added to the name to reflect the diversity of spa and leisure activities that are on offer – is located on Monte Argentario, a blob of land connected to Tuscany's mainland by two lagoons and a narrow bridge. A 90-minute drive from Rome, the resort occupies a secluded valley floor location which looms into view like a badger's lair in a James Bond movie as you drive up the long and winding entrance. The hotel, which is cut into the side of the valley, is said to resemble a dragonfly from the air, with the 78 bedrooms and suites representing the four wings located either side of the lobby area's body. As you enter the vast reception area and move

through the main public spaces, the overall design style is probably best described as minimalist chic, with high ceilings, acres of glass and statement artwork, presented in monotone palette of black and white, creating the feeling that you're in a carefully curated space.

The four floors of the hotel are all home to a different room category. First floor rooms offer a minimalist contemporary design with white resin floors. On the second floor, rooms have hardwood floors and colourful design items that evoke a 1950s feel. The third floor is home to the Travel Club suites, which combine dark parquet floors, safari-style furniture and freestanding stone baths. Exclusive Master and business suites, as well as a wellness suite with private gym, are situated on the fourth floor. Is that enough talk of floors? I think so. All the rooms, apart from fronting floors (tohh), also have private balconies and terraces offering fabulous views out over the 18-hole golf course and across the valley to the Orbetello Lagoon and the Tyrrhenian Sea beyond.

If you are visiting with a large family or a group of friends, then the resort's choice of luxury rental villas located on the hillside overlooking the golf course are well worth considering. The most impressive of these is Hills Lodge, which includes five bedrooms, four bathrooms, a living room, kitchen and patio. The villas offer the exclusivity of being away from the main hotel, yet you still have the convenience of

hotel service, along with complimentary use of a golf buggy. For those looking for a holiday home, there are some new villas currently being built that are for sale for those with deep pockets.

The resort has access to its own private beach, with a free shuttle service available to guests to take them on the short journey. Alternative water-based activities can be enjoyed in the hotel's two large swimming pools, one heated and indoors and the other unheated and outdoors, the latter of which I'm sure is much in demand during the height of Italy's hot summers, but not so much in late March, when I visited.

The resort's extensive, 2,700 m² spa boasts a fitness centre with Technogym equipment, bio sauna with chromotherapy, Knopp circuit, heated indoor swimming pool with saline water, six massage cabins and tanning showers, while the Espace Wellness Centre focuses on relaxation and pampering with its



THE HOTEL BOASTS STYLISH INTERIORS

many massage and treatment rooms.

Other leisure facilities include two tennis courts, a five-a-side football pitch, and, somewhat incongruously, a polo field, although I forgot to bring my horse, so that ruled me out of a quick chukka or two. There are also miles of walking and jogging trails around the 80-hectare estate, but if I'm going to do any walking it will only be with a golf bag in tow. And, thankfully, they cater for that too, in the shape of the 6,288-metre championship course that enjoys PGA National status.

Having the letters 'PGA' attached to a golf course – there is only one allowed in each country – no doubt adds a certain caché, but it also implies a level of difficulty, and that is definitely the case here, as the par-71 course, which measures a lengthy 6,803 yards off the very back tees – and 6,440 off the competition tees – looks and plays like it has been designed to challenge the very best. Let's just say I was glad that our hosts generously dished out a sleeve of balls as we set out for the first tee, as the moderate stock that I smuggled into my hand luggage didn't last much beyond the turn.

Given the land on which the course was built was previously used as the island's rubbish dump, it must have taken golf course designer David Mozzacane no small amount of imagination – and millions of tons of earth moving – to create the layout that meets golfers today. First opened in 2006, the course is one



THE PAR-3 THIRD HOLE OFFERS STUNNING VIEWS TO THE ORBISTELLO LAGOON

THE SOUND OF SWEARING AND GOLF BALL ON TREE ECHOED AS WE ZIG-ZAGGED OUR WAY TOWARDS THE GREEN ON WHAT MIGHT BE THE TIGHTEST PAR 3 IN WORLD GOLF

of contrasts, with some holes winding their way up and down through densely wooded areas, where cork trees and oaks threaten to stymie you at every turn, while there are also far more open expanses, where wide fairways bisected by ditches and large ponds serve to keep you honest.

I won't submit you to a detailed hole-by-hole description, but early highlights for me included the par-5 third and the par-3 fifth, both of which offer views out to the sea. The former is played from a raised tee to a crumpled fairway on the valley floor below that snakes its way up to a distant green, while the latter features a green protected by no fewer than seven bunkers.

The par-five 6th is a cleverly constructed three-shot hole that doesn't allow you just fire off a driver and hope for the best, as two sections of water intersect the fairway at different points to ensure that you have to plot your way carefully to the green. The 7th was a slightly odd 240-yard par-4 with a lake guarding the direct line between tee and green and only a narrow sliver of fairway to aim at to the right. A 5-iron and a wedge would do the job, but it wasn't my idea of what makes a decent short par four, as your options off the tee are too limited.

The 8th is arguably the tightest par three in world golf, with a tunnel of trees barely the width of a B road separating the tee from the green. The sound of swearing and golf ball on tree echoed throughout the 10 minutes it took our group to complete the task, and I was personally delighted to sign for a bogey.

After steading the ship around the turn where the course opens up a bit, things get more testing over the closing stretch, especially at the 17th, a 180-yard par three that features a green flanked by water and a 'ball out' area to the right features two bunkers. My tee shot found one of the traps and left me with a knee-knocking bunker shot back towards the pin with water behind. The closing hole is another potential card wrecker, with the fairway split by a group of trees, while the approach shot is tough too, with the green being small and well protected.

My overall impression was this was a course that demands multiple plays to appreciate its nuances and learn where to attack and where to defend, but also one that requires that all elements of your game



THE PAR-3 17TH FORMS PART OF A TOUGH CLOSING STRETCH



THE HOTEL OFFERS 70 ROOMS AND SUITES, PLUS A RANGE OF PRIVATE RENTAL VILLAS, WHILE THERE'S EXTENSIVE LEISURE AND SPA FACILITIES

to be on point. Less than perfect shots will be punished, and often punished hard, so whether that makes for a fun round of holiday golf, I'm not so sure, but it was certainly never dull.

Playing in late March, after what I was told was an unusually dry winter, I was somewhat disappointed with the condition of the tees and fairways, which were parched in places and somewhat lacking in grass in others, but there was no faulting the greens, which were well presented, evenly paced and rolled out well.

On the food front, which comes a close second to the golf course for me when it comes to the demands of a memorable golf trip, the hotel offers two restaurants and a breakfast room. *Dama Dama* – which is the scientific name for the fallow deer that can be found roaming freely in the woods that surround the resort – is the fine dining option, but sadly it was closed during our off-season visit, so I can't testify to its quality, but the menu looked interesting, with a focus on fresh seafood and reinterpretations of rustic Tuscan classics such as *lagliatelle* with wild boar ragu and rabbit-filled ravioli, while the wine list offers a good choice of red and whites from local producers in southern Tuscany at decent prices. The restaurant flows outside to an expansive terrace, which, I imagine, would be an amazing spot to enjoy a meal

on a warm summer's evening.

The Clubhouse Restaurant, where we ate all our meals, serves light lunches and evening meals, with an emphasis on freshly caught fish and shellfish, pasta dishes, steaks and salads. It, too, boasts a large terrace overlooking the golf course which was a particularly enjoyable spot to relax after a challenging round with a chilled glass of Sangiovese. I should also add a shout out to the mixologist at the hotel's *Aper Bar*, who certainly knows his way around a cocktail list and has plenty of his own creations up his sleeve.

Away from the resort, there is much to explore, including Monte Argentario itself, with the views from the very top stretching to Elba and Corsica, while the pretty coastal towns of Porto Santo Stefano and Porto Ercole are also well worth a visit with their bustling marinas and collection of seaside restaurants and cafés. And, of course, you can also factor in time to spend in Rome on your return journey, visiting some of the world's most famous sites.

ARGENTARIO GOLF & WELLNESS RESORT GOLF PACKAGES

Three nights' B&B in double superior room, including three rounds of golf, starts from £1,052pp. For more information, visit argentarioresort.com, call 00 39 0564 810290, or email bookings@argentarioresort.it.