

# Bringing golf to Benin

Jeremy Pern and Gregori International are creating the first 18-hole course in the West African country, on an 'almost perfect' site that also includes a sacred grove and voodoo shrines.

**O**n a thin stretch of swamp land, just a few hundred metres from the Atlantic Ocean, Benin's first 18-hole golf course is taking shape.

The project was established following a directive from Benin's president Patrice Talon to diversify the country's economy – which is highly reliant on agriculture, particularly cotton – by developing industries such as tourism, banking and services.

The Benin government identified the small town of Avlékété, near Cotonou, the country's largest city and main port, as an ideal spot for a tourist development. It has, for several years, been establishing infrastructure, including roads, and working with various international tourist operators to prepare the area for tourism. Golf was identified as an important amenity.



*Shaping is almost complete at Avlékété, and four holes are also now growing in*





*The island par-three eleventh is followed by an island par-five hole*

Photo: Afrikatun Production – Stéphane Brabant

French construction firm Gregori International was hired to build the course and in 2021, asked architect Jeremy Pern to assist with feasibility studies.

“It’s a long, thin stretch of land of about 100 hectares,” says Pern. “Parts of the land are great, and parts are a bit of a challenge. About half of it is rolling sand, very ‘linksy’, plus or minus a couple of metres in height, where farmers were growing tomatoes, peppers, manioc and maize. Surrounding the sandy area is swamp land and a coastal lagoon. There’s also a wide range of trees – including a variety of palms, coconuts and mangos.

“Once the environmental impact studies and permits were approved, the detailed design phase was rapid,

with no endless administrative niggles that have become so common elsewhere. Working in Benin has been a delight, the enthusiasm for the project from the locals has been a refreshing change from the hostility that occasionally greets golf course developments in Europe.”

Construction started in late May 2024 and, ten months later, earthmoving and shaping is almost complete, irrigation has been installed on 12 holes, four holes are growing-in with Pure Dynasty seeded paspalum supplied by Atlas Turf International and Pure Seed, and 3,000 mature trees and hundreds of mangrove saplings have been planted. The project has included moving 500,000 cubic metres of sand, while 15 to 20 hectares of lakes and wetlands have been created.

Grassing is expected to be complete by June 2025, with the course available for preview play in October and an official opening in early 2026.

“This project has finally given me the chance to do stuff I have always dreamt of but have so far lacked the opportunity, or perhaps the courage, to push the envelope that little bit further,” says Pern. “My bucket list of ideas has been ticked off and until I’m informed otherwise by dissatisfied golfers, I’ll stick my neck out and say that I’m satisfied.

“Ample space has allowed tee placements that enable holes to be played very long or very short; big and numerous tees offer a very wide variety of angles to approach the fairways and greens; and there are



forced carries to add variable options. All of this allows for a wider skill range of golfers to play and enjoy themselves. Sandy wastes, beach, pot and splash bunkers, grassy hollows and bomb holes – you’ll find them all.”

The course will have a combination of flat and rugged fairways, and some holes with plenty of bunkers (especially on the back nine) and others with only a couple (such as the first and second). “We have a pair of tiny greens and two or three huge ones, a forced carry or two, water-free tree-lined holes and an island par five following on from an island par three,” says Pern. “A course for all seasons and all tastes.”

There have been some restrictions on the 100-hectare site, identified during the early stages of the project and planned for accordingly. These include seven voodoo shrines, some of which haven’t been touched, and others in the trees that were moved by priests. And in the middle of the site is a sacred grove, covering about half a hectare, that has been preserved and isolated.

“The marshes, dunes, trees and voodoo shrines mean the golf course has to thread its way through these areas,” says Pern. “To escape the rise

and fall of a seasonal water table and the wet season floods, low-lying playing areas were raised considerably, so opportunities for total fairway shaping were everywhere – resulting in some very interesting contouring. The highest point on the course is only three metres above the lowest, so in terms of topography it resembles a true links landscape, not a dunescape.

“The crashing waves on the shore of the Gulf of Guinea are only a few hundred meters away. Like a genuine links course, the wind is ever-present; from mid-morning to mid-afternoon, the sea breezes rise and then fall. The lakes and wetlands are beginning to attract waterfowl and, in time, more will settle as the course will become replete with the wildlife that was driven away long ago by subsistence agriculture.”

The architect says that the site’s sand “pretty much meets USGA rootzone specifications already” and that it has allowed him design freedom for creating greens. “The site has provided everything except the stones for the riprap on the lake edges,” says Pern. “The

design has been carefully calibrated to exploit everything that the site has – big trees, water and wetlands, greens mix and bunker sand, organic matter and mangrove seedlings.”

Pern and Gregori International have worked together on several projects, including the nine-hole course at Golf Soldeu in Andorra, which opened in 2008, and Casa Green Golf Club in Casablanca, Morocco, which opened in 2013.

“I’ve never worked on a project that has achieved so much in such a short space of time,” says Xavier Gregori, CEO of Gregori International. “We have been blessed with an almost perfect site for a golf course – sand, trees and water in abundance. Having said that, I believe that what has made this project exceptional is the fact that there has been a single company with a design-and-build turnkey contract working for the government whose support and trust in our team has been consistent and solid.” **GCA**



*Pern has routed the course over a long, thin stretch of land of about 100 hectares*