

PROFILED

Charting a new course

OUIDAH GOLF CLUB, BENIN, WEST AFRICA

Ouidah Golf Club is the first 18-hole golf course in the West African nation of Benin, and has been built as part of the country's desire for economic diversification.

Benin has long relied on the export of raw agricultural commodities, particularly cotton, to drive its economy. In the pursuit of diversification, the country has embarked upon several new initiatives to boost investment and prosperity.

Flagship projects include the Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone, a 1,600-hectare manufacturing hub that, since opening in 2022, has attracted over US\$1 billion in foreign investment and created over 16,000 jobs; and the five-year modernisation and expansion of the

Port of Cotonou, which is due for completion this year. Development of its tourism sector is also a central pillar of its national development plan.

West of Cotonou, the country's largest city, is the town of Avlékété, where Ouidah Golf Club is ready to open the nation's first 18-hole golf course, designed by Jeremy Pern and built by Gregori International. It is hoped that the club will attract international visitors while also appealing to a growing domestic middle class.

"The objective was to adopt a comprehensive destination-development approach – one that is firmly connected to the territory, its local identity and its communities," says Joan Dessaint Fomi, a director at ANPT, the country's agency for heritage and tourism. "The development of high-quality facilities is intended to strengthen the appeal of Benin as a tourism destination."

It is hoped that the Ouidah course can be a catalyst for similar developments in the country, all

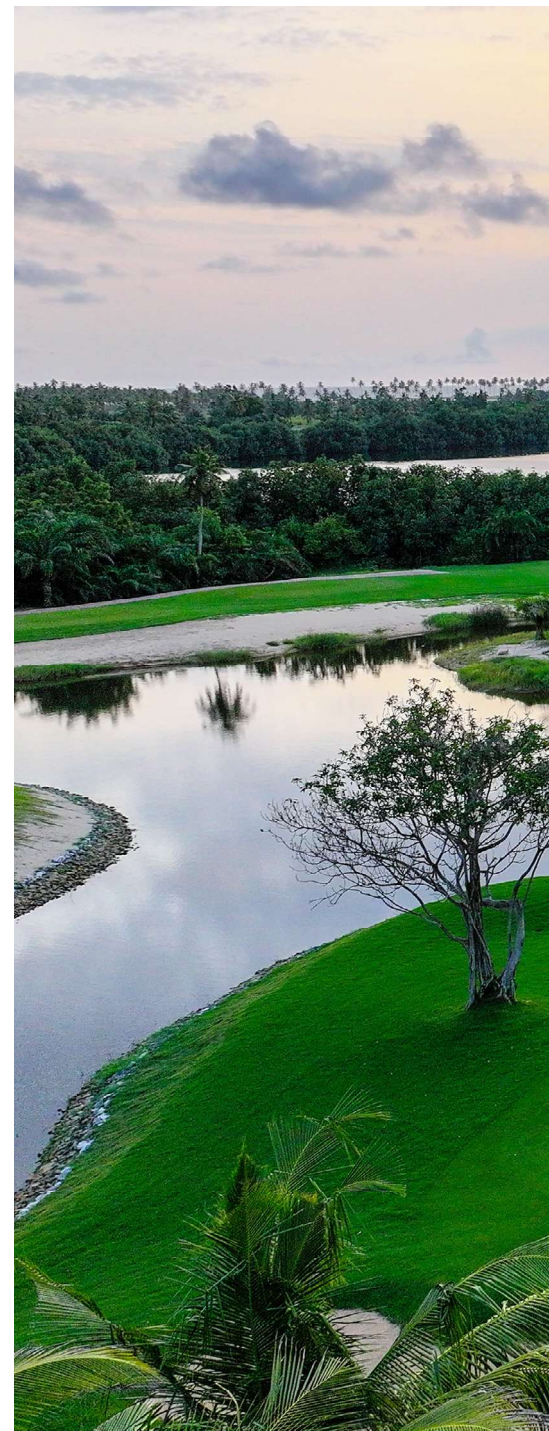




Photo: Afrikafun Production, Stéphane Brabant

The government of Benin hopes that Ouidah Golf Club will help attract international visitors while also appealing to a growing domestic middle class

bringing economic and social benefits to the local community.

“Ouidah was conceived as a strategic piece of infrastructure, combining tourism, sport, environmental stewardship and local development, while supporting the long-term growth of the destination through a sustainable approach,” says Fomi.

The golf course has been created on a 100-hectare site near the Gulf of Guinea, which had some unique features, including several voodoo shrines and a 1.2-acre sacred grove, as

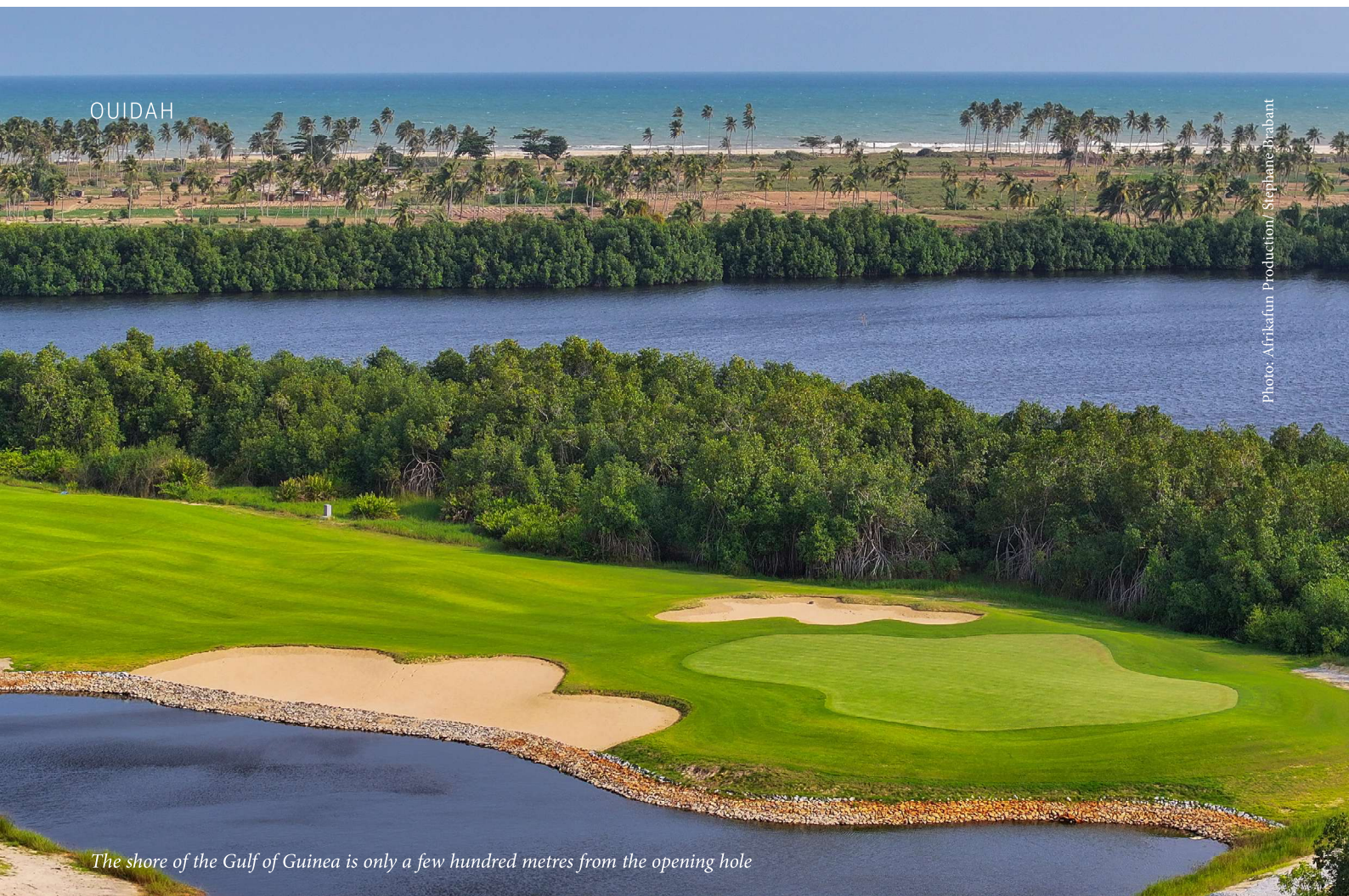
referenced in our report in the April 2025 issue of *Golf Course Architecture*.

“The grove is dedicated to fish and members of the local fishing community,” says Pern. “My initial routing plan had the seventh and eighth playing through the grove but following some head scratching and changing par threes into fours, and vice versa, the accommodation of the fish spirits was satisfactorily accomplished. The now out-of-bounds grove stands intact... I hope far enough back from golfers, but should a stray ball find its way into

this holy of holies, there it will remain, untouched, for eternity.”

Gregori International’s Xavier Gregori says: “The site offered rare potential. Its sandy soil was a major advantage for golf course development, particularly in terms of drainage, shaping and playing quality. The relatively low-lying and open topography was ideally suited to the creation of a true links-style course: understated, natural and fully integrated into its surroundings.”

Targeted clearing, selection and transplantation works allowed part



The shore of the Gulf of Guinea is only a few hundred metres from the opening hole

of the site's natural vegetation to be retained, explains Gregori, "opening up lines of play, circulation routes and visual readability of the course".

"My first site visit coincided with the end of the dry season," says Pern. "Crops had been harvested, leaving desiccated tomato stalks and pepper

Working with Christian Pace, agronomist and technical director of Gregori International, Pern tested different grass species to see what would best suit the site. Pure Dynasty seeded paspalum, supplied by Atlas Turf International and Pure Seed, was chosen.

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bush twigs sticking up through the dried and crinkled weeds. Water supply to the irrigation system was a serious worry. My second visit came in the middle of a wet season where large parts of the site were either submerged or hovering just above the groundwater. Concerns turned from irrigation issues to drainage decisions."

Most of the Ouidah site was originally less than half a metre above the wet season's maximum high-water level. "With thoughts of rising oceans in the coming decades, raising playing areas to at least 1.5 metres above the water level was the only long-term solution," says Pern. "By excavating the marshland and creating additional lakes, we moved 500,000 cubic metres

of sand to raise the course out of danger. Topographically-speaking, a true links course has emerged with a height differential of only two metres, with not one square metre of flat land."

Despite the constraints, Pern always felt like he was working with "a blank slate". That is rare for a golf course architect, as is designing a nation's first golf course.

"My response to the dilemma of creating the impossible Swiss Army Knife golf course that appeals to both golf's superheroes and mere mortals is to imagine a course routing that Mr Average might enjoy, superimposed onto a championship layout," says Pern. "I have laid out extensive tees, dispersed not just along the length of the hole, but spread laterally as well. On one hole, the forced carry off the back tee can be avoided by playing from a tee that is 30 metres to the side."



Jeremy Pern describes the project as 'a golf architect's dream'

Fairways are wide, bunkers have mainly been located at landing areas for the longer hitters, and greens are expansive, although Pern says there are one or two “devilish” pin positions that could be used.

“A golf course is like a symphony with 18 movements to be discerned individually but judged as a whole,” says Pern. “Rhythm of play should rise and fall in a measured fashion; the occasional quiet spell, a gradual build up, and then a crescendo and memorable finale. I have created a diverse assortment of holes, and each has its own distinct character, specifically designed to be part of a larger but coherent composition.

“Like all seaside courses, wind is a big factor so club selection will present its own complexity. Whilst water is ever present, and admittedly on some holes a very direct threat, it is more often a lurking menace than an insurmountable obstacle.”

The 142-yard, par-three fifth, the shortest hole on the course, encapsulates the influence of wind and water, with an accurate shot needed

to hit a narrow green. At the 600-yard twelfth, a very wide and windswept fairway is flanked by water and sandy waste areas. “The fourth is a cosy par four playing into wind with a long, narrow and undulating green backed on three sides by a lake, close enough to threaten but far enough away to pardon all but the most erratic approach shot,” says Pern. “The finishing hole is the

opportunities for a new generation of young Beninese golfing talent to emerge,” she adds. “Ouidah Golf Club is expected to play an important role in establishing partnerships with schools and educational institutions, thereby supporting the long-term development of golf participation in Benin.”

Pern describes the project as “a golf architect’s dream”, whether that be

“A golf course is like a symphony with 18 movements to be discerned individually but judged as a whole”

crescendo, with discreet but sometimes hidden surprises. The 480-yard par four – or a short par five for the less ambitious – plays into the wind, has no water but lots of bunkers surrounding an enormous green, a fitting end to the symphony.”

Ouidah is not exclusively aimed at tourists or high-income players, says Fomi, it has a strong commitment to develop golf at a local level.

“Particular attention has been given to training local players and creating

the large and ecologically rich site, the lack of interference from the client or unlimited water supply. And given the government’s tourism mandate, the development also benefitted from swift processes for permitting and construction.

“During a 50-year career in golf course design, this project stands out,” says Pern. “From my very first visit to the course being in play usually takes five, 10 or 20 years. Here, we did it all in less than two!” **GCA**