



LISBON
SPORTS CLUB

A delightful discovery



by **Philip Quinn**
(Irish Daily Mail)

With direct flights from Ireland, a very pleasant microclimate, an exhilarating capital city and some of the finest golf courses in Continental Europe, the glamorous and hospitable LISBON COAST has gained many admirers, including Philip Quinn and a group of friends who are so captivated by the region's charms that they have returned each year since 2005.

After ten years on the Lisbon golf beat, we thought we had seen it all. Penha Longa. Check. Estoril. Check. Ottavos. Check.

We had traversed the Tagus to play Troia, rolled up at Ribagolfe I and II, and potted about in Praia de Rey.

No boundaries, and no out of bounds markers either, were left uncovered by our intrepid six-man crew.

Wherever there was a flag flying atop a mown area of turf, we were there – the two Jimas of golf trekkers, no matter how many shots, or lost balls, it took.

As we followed the pathways of Portugal's pioneers, we marvelled at the number of outstanding courses within touching distance of our hideaway in Praia das Macas – the beach of the apples, just over the hill from Sintra.

And then, against the odds, we stumbled upon a golfing trail less trodden, and one that clearly wanted wear – the Lisbon Sports Club.

After playing 17 different courses, it seemed fitting that the 18th, the one to complete the set, should glisten with that most coveted of golfing caveats - the hidden gem.

Hewn out a tree-lined hillside, criss-crossed by babbling brooks, and decorated by greens slicker than the top of my hairless head, the par 69 lay-out was a series of endless joys.

From the moment we stood on the elevated tee on the par-three first, and glimpsed a green far below, flanked by stream, sand and shrub, we were hooked.

In some cases, literally, as reloads were aplenty.

Our first experience was a soggy one, shortened by a torrential downpour which turned greens into ponds and fairways into lagoons.

Such was the ferocity of nature, that one forlorn ball, left unattended on a green, was swept 40 yards downhill, at pace.

Play it from where it comes to rest, barked the senior member of our wrecking crew as I splash-splashed down the fairway to retrieve what had been a half-decent tee shot a few minutes earlier.

Only six holes were completed on the curtailed introduction to Lisbon Sports Club but Hugo Amaral, the club secretary, kindly made arrangements for our return the following Saturday.

He asked would we mind teeing off after the club championships, at around noon. Would we mind? Of course, we wouldn't.

The return trip confirmed our hunch that we had come across a course tailor-made for the discerning golfer as well as the whole-hearted higher handicapper.

The six one-shotters are nuggets, four of them played from raised tees; the three long holes each involve a skirmish with water, while there are a cluster of delightful short par fours, which weave through scented pine.

A sign on the 15th tee warns that the Roman ruins to the right of the green are in play as I found to my cost when an errant approach shot landed in an ancient potty.

The toughest test is left to the last as the 18th is a full-bodied 450-yarder, played through a funnel of trees, flanked by out of bounds on the left and a gurgling channel on the right.

To finish that hole with the same ball you started is an achievement.

While our six-man crew, with handicaps ranging from 14 to 24, found pars hard to come by, the enjoyment factor was immense and already we have pencilled in 2015 for a reunion.

That the Lisbon Sports Club had hitherto avoided our scrutiny was due, in part, to our negligence and because the club's custodians were content to stay out of sight, and out of mind.

Not now. According to Amaral, the doors are open for all-comers.

Amaral recognises Lisbon Sports Club has ground to make up as Irish visitors, who have descended on Lisbon for years, have steered clear of a club which didn't always have the 'welcome mat' on show.

Why so? For many years, the Lisbon Sports Club was an exclusive, members-only operation, a tag it has struggled to shrug off despite a shift in club policy some 20 years ago.

Founded in 1880 by wealthy British residents, the Lisbon Sports Club first dabbled with golf in 1900 when six holes were laid out in the city.

The club's roots are evident in a glass case on the stairs leading to a welcoming lounge.

The case contains three ancient balls of play circa 1920 - one for golf, one for tennis, and one for cricket.

The move of Lisbon Sports Club to the countryside, near Belas, took place in 1962 where 14 holes were built, along with tennis courts and a fine clubhouse.

By 1992, a facelift was required and Fred Hawtree and Sons, the distinguished architects, were called in to oversee an overdue extension to 18 holes.

The Hawtree handcraft is familiar to Irish golfers, as the company has revised and updated such renowned championship courses as Lahinch, Portmarnock, The Island, and Royal Dublin, among others.

And the creative Hawtree touch, evident in the rolling hills just 20km outside Lisbon deserves a wider audience. For certain, we will be back.

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Casal da Carregueira,
Belas, Lisbon Coast.

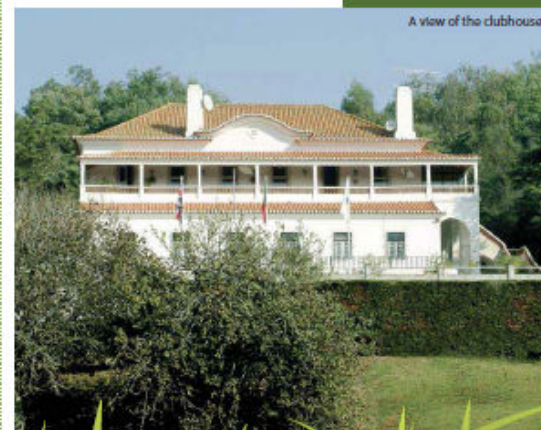
18 holes - Par 69

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A view of the clubhouse

Photographs courtesy of the
Lisbon Sports Club