

COURSES

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TOP 100 SPOTLIGHT

Hardelot (Les Pins)

Chris Bertram reports on the significant renovation of this long-time favourite of travelling British golfers.

British influence in the town of Hardelot on the north-east coast of France is easy to detect as you arrive in this pretty seaside outpost. Even if the Union flag adorning the town's coat of arms escapes your gaze, as you cruise along idyllic avenues lined by sweet-scented trees and elegant villas, you are reminded of well-heeled English villages. It is not unlike a more concise replica of Wentworth estate.

Neufchâtel-Hardelot, to give this resort in the Pas de Calais region its full name, is an immaculately-presented and prosperous testament to the 'Entente Cordiale'. The British mien results from Hardelot being established in 1905 by Yorkshireman Sir John Whitley, who owned the local chateau. An advocate of outdoor pursuits, he included tennis courts, an equestrian centre, watersports and a golf course in his plans for this new town on the dunes of the Opal Coast.

Word soon spread of these attractions and it enjoyed prominence in Edwardian times, with King George V among those

who visited. Whitley had already created another Anglophilic town a few miles down the coastal, Le Touquet. It too had a golf course and both were ultimately shaped by architects from his homeland.

While Le Touquet got Harry Colt, at Hardelot it was Tom Simpson. This noted creator of heathland masterpieces arrived in 1931 and ever since visitors have poured over the channel to enjoy his work at Les Pins – and indeed everything about Hardelot. Even when golf holidays to Iberia became readily available, British golfers stayed loyal to Hardelot and Le Touquet in large numbers.

Yet in recent times it was as much habit based on sentimentality and convenience – Hardelot is 40 minutes from the Channel Tunnel – than excitement. Both courses had begun to lose their aura.

Les Pins – whose sister course Les Dunes sits on dramatically undulating land a 15-minute walk away, along with its own clubhouse – is set among a pine forest, but being within a mile of the sea, the topography is essentially sandy linksland. It had suffered significantly from the linked issues of undesirable tree growth and subsequently maintenance. A forest generates as much as three per

LEFT AND BELOW: The removal of 3,000 trees has breathed life back into Les Pins. A less is more approach has helped redefine Tom Simpson's original vision.



cent of new wood every year – so over eight decades, that is a significant amount.

The additional timber altered Les Pins' character from the fast-and-firm track Simpson envisaged to a lush, soft course lined by overhanging branches. This playground of poa comprised narrowed fairways, runway-like tees, mis-shapen bunkers and smaller, shapeless greens.

Both the Harelot and Le Touquet clubs are operated by golf and hotel business Open Golf Club who, realising their star courses were losing their lustre, sought the assistance of 'The Restoration Man', Frank Pont. But while the Dutchman – whose name might be familiar from his work at Royal Hague, Camberley Heath et al – was fully involved in the projects, he has been assisted extensively by Patrice Boissonnas, whose family owns Open Golf Club.

Boissonnas is a Paris business school graduate who became inspired, four years ago, by France's awarding of the 2018 Ryder Cup to pursue his teenage passion for golf course architecture.

Accepting he would not be entrusted

'Le Pins has seen the rebirth of Tom Simpson's original, the course transformed back to his 1930s intentions'

with the task of revitalising Open Golf Club's superstar courses (they also have others in France, Belgium, Holland and Morocco), Boissonnas was permitted to work alongside an experienced hand.

With Pont initially tutoring intensely, Boissonnas flourished. The master and his apprentice began at Le Touquet but decided to do a trial hole at Harelot, spending a week re-working the 5th. It was such a success that the Harelot project gathered more momentum and overtook that of Le Touquet (three new holes of which have just opened).

Over three subsequent years, the work of this Dutch-French alliance has resulted in the re-birth of Simpson's original, using 90-year-old photographs and sketches to help transform it back to the Englishman's 1930s intentions.

Three thousand trees have been cut – and more may follow – while the undergrowth has been scraped to bring back the natural sandy blowouts. Every bunker was rebuilt in the dynamic Simpson style; lace-edge sand pits that, according to Boissonnas "honour the artistic vision of the great architect and create a stronger, more strategic defence on this relatively short course". Eleven



ABOVE AND BELOW: The more open approaches give cause for optimism but Les Pins can easily seduce you into easy bogeys. **LEFT:** Every bunker on the course has been rebuilt in the dynamic Simpson style; with lace-edged sand pits that create a stronger, more strategic defence on what is a relatively short course.



HOW WE REBUILT A CLASSIC COURSE

Exclusive: Patrice Boissonnas reflects on the work that has breathed new life into Simpson's layout.

Would Les Pins have lost its kudos without the overhaul? Totally! The course was overgrown with trees, resulting in a loss of strategic options and causing some real maintenance issues.

How would you describe its character – heathland, links, woodland?

It's more like an inland links to me: it is not a links but has a lot of links-like features starting with the sandy dunes and the beautiful natural contours on both greens and fairways. In 1931, the site was already a pine forest on natural sandy dunes. The promoter at the time spent a fortune clearing trees and getting fairways ready to grow grass.

Given the sandy soil, is it possible fescues could be encouraged? And heather?

The natural environment of forest is not perfectly suited for fescue. Our plan for now is to encourage fescue on fairways only. The greens will be converted from poa to mainly bent with poa. The soil is a little too alkaline to grow heather although our agronomist has recently spotted a variety named 'beach heather' which seems to thrive in a less acidic environment. It's a lead we will follow in the coming

years. If it works, our idea is to bring heather in limited, designated areas but we don't intend to make it a 'Morfontaine on the coast'.

Where would you rank Les Pins alongside, say, Morfontaine, Golf National, and Seignosse?

On pure architectural criteria, I would put Harelot at the top of the list, even ahead of Morfontaine. I think Harelot has more variety, it stimulates more your imagination and calls for a larger spectrum of golfing skills. As much as I enjoy playing Morfontaine, I always have more fun at Les Pins. Now if you compare the general experience [including natural beauty, atmosphere, maintenance, etc] I would clearly put Morfontaine first. I would then have Golf National. Seignosse is fun but I think it belongs to a lower category.

How good is it to work on a site so sandy?

It's a dream for everyone: architects, shapers, contractors... It makes winter work fully efficient [no rain/frost delays] and it's a great material to sculpt shapes with. Just like play dough, it's easy to undo/redo, it makes building in the field faster and easier than any other type of soil.



bunkers were created – on the flat par-5 13th alone, five were built for visual and strategic reasons – and four closed.

Greens were extended back to their original size, fairways were widened, several tee boxes rebuilt, and run-off areas created around some greens (notably on the first two holes as well as 6, 8, 11, 13 and then the three from the 15th).

To avoid crossing between the opening holes of both nines, the 1st and 10th have been switched back to Simpson's routing, which was modified when a road was built between the 9th green and 1st tee.

Sporty two-shotters at 11 and 15 were adapted to ensure they remain fun yet competitive. The work on 11 – from the new tees, the green is visible and driveable – is the main move from Simpson's plan, but the original tees are still available for those seeking the 1931 experience.

Les Pins is also now a par 71, with the 2nd and 16th dropping to par 4s... a change made at the behest of the members!

The greens remained untouched save for deep drilling that, in order to break up compaction beneath them, allowed them to drain more efficiently and become firm as a result. They are now hand mown.

"They are in our opinion *the* treasure of Les Pins," adds Boissonnas. "We made some minor modifications here and there (with some to come) but that's mostly to



ABOVE: Alongside the tree removal, significant undergrowth has been scraped back to bring back the natural sandy blowouts, as shown here on the 11th.
LEFT: Another laced-edged bunker lies in wait on the 10th.
RIGHT: The 5th epitomises Les Pins' rediscovered spirit: fun but fraught with danger.



LAZILY EXACTING

A sporty two-shotter that has a bit of bite.

8th, 337 yards, par 4

In addition to the outstanding and varied collection of short holes we describe in the main article, Hardelot is also home to an enviable portfolio of par 4s.

Many would select the blind, snaking 9th with its Mackenzie-esque cluster of bunkers in the dune ridge and its reward for a brave line down the left.

Or perhaps the driveable 11th with its enticing new tee. Or maybe 15, where your drive from an elevated tee must slide right to ease round the corner while also having to avoid the stand of pines that give a split fairway effect; an excellent drive is rewarded with a short iron into a green atop a dune.

Instead we have opted for

the 8th, which begins with a drive struck between sand hills that form a V-shaped gap – almost like sights on an old rifle – for you to fire through.

The pin is already visible and with no greenside bunkers, on first inspection you might well deem this an innocuous two-shotter but with another green – and the shortest in length at 20m – that joyously rejects modest approaches, it can bite.

Architect Patrice Boissonnas is also a fan of this two-shotter.

"It looks beautiful – and even better now that we have

cut some more trees," he tells *Golf World*. "Plus it epitomises the Simpson motto that a good golf hole should never play how it looks.

"We have a sketch of this hole made by Simpson himself and if you look carefully, he planned to put a bunker short of the green. We never found any sign of that bunker. My guess is he realised the hole

The green on Les Pins' 8th rejects all but the most confident approaches.

would be much more confusing if looking easier.

"I loved sitting behind the green in European Tour pre-qualifying, watching all these strong players losing their mind on this apparently simple hole."

reduce unfriendly humps from decades of sand splashing out of bunkers."

The result is very impressive indeed. When we ranked Les Pins in the late 90s of our Continental European Top 100 two years ago, it felt like 2015 might see this old favourite fall out of our listing completely. Now the dilemma is in managing its rise properly.

It is impossible to not have fun here, and not just because its yardage of under 6,500 ensures it is not a slog. When you learn it is also now generally not especially tight, you might suspect flattery is the reason for its allure. Not so; while the forgiving corridors of play help higher handicappers enjoy the day, there is plenty of subtle challenge around the greens. Les Pins seduces you into making bogeys.

The gradual increase in length of the short holes is a nice example of its stealthily strategic test. The first par 3 – the 5th, which saw trees axed and the bunkers that surround the green like a moat rebuilt more attractively and also with added sharp-edged intimidation – is nothing more than a wedge shot at 120 yards downhill. Two holes later a similar

'It is impossible not to have fun playing here – yet Les Pins will seduce you into making bogeys'

visual prospect awaits but this time it is 150 yards. A 8 or 7-iron perhaps.

On the classy downhill 12th it is 160 yards. A 6-iron. On the 14th – so achingly beautiful it could be at Augusta National or Sunningdale – it's a full 175 yards and as much as a 4-iron to get over the 'tongue' of the sloping front. By the penultimate hole you are reaching for a hybrid or 4-wood to cover its 180 yards.

From pitching wedge to 4-wood, Hardelot's short holes probe and please in an orderly, polite and picturesque fashion.

Pinpointing favourite holes is not easy (see left), for there is impressive variety to the individual challenges here; the old cliché of every club in your bag is actually relevant, as competitors in the first stage of European Tour Q School discovered. The four-round winning total on this 6,450-yard course was eight under.

Les Pins is only likely to improve

further too. The sandy subsoil ought to equate to a firm 'linksy' experience, even if there are still plenty of trees to pay tribute to the course's name and also disguise the occasional handsome house on its perimeter. Bouncy, fescue-covered fairways would improve the playing experience yet further and although Boissonnas says they are not trying to recreate Morfontaine here, in this golfer's mind patches of heather interspersed with the pines and sandy blowouts would be magnificent. One or both of these developments are possible with further tree pruning to let in more sunlight. And if they do, British golfers seeking a high-calibre course away from our own shores will struggle to find too many better venues on Continental Europe. **CW**

KEY INFORMATION

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