



Kingdom of Golf

Swaziland is home to one of the most relaxing golf resorts in Southern Africa, the Royal Swazi Sun, and its long-established course is the only 18-holer in the kingdom, a real gem that can truthfully be said to be one of the most enjoyable layouts in Africa in terms of scenic beauty, playability and conditioning.

Text Stuart McLean

The Royal Swazi Sun Country Club in the Ezulweni Valley, near Mbabane, occupies a special place in the hearts of South African golfers, professionals and amateurs alike, who have been journeying there, mostly in groups, for the last 40 years to experience its pleasures. Many golf tournaments, pro-ams and holiday packages have been held in that time at what is now a prominent Sun International resort, exposing different generations of golfers to some especially fun and memorable moments in their lives.

The course is a favourite with everyone because at under 6 000 metres in length off the club tees it flatters most people who play the game. The greens are tricky, but getting to them from the tee is not the most difficult task in the world, even though the course has its fair share of hazards, in the way of trees, water and bunkers. It's very much a tree-lined course, and these magnificently mature species are major obstacles if you miss the fairway.

The Sunshine Tour has been playing tournaments there on an annual basis for the last 37 years, since the Royal Swazi Sun hosted the original Holiday Inns Open in March, 1971. Always one of the final tournaments of the summer, it was a unique event in that the tour professionals played the early rounds in a pro-am format with amateur partners. A great party atmosphere existed all week, and there was lavish entertainment and shows laid on for guests. It had a casino at a time when gambling was prohibited in South Africa. There were legendary stories of golfers, including professionals like Simon Hobday and Tertius Claassens, making

No course has hosted as many professional tournaments in Southern Africa, and the Sunshine Tour now stages two tournaments a year at the Royal Swazi Sun, and these are played in the winter months, usually May and June, when the weather is slightly cooler.

their way from the casino to the first tee in the morning, having never had a wink of sleep.

No course has hosted as many professional tournaments in Southern Africa, and the Sunshine Tour now stages two tournaments a year at the Royal Swazi Sun, and these are played in the winter months, usually May and June, when the weather is slightly cooler. The tropical Swaziland climate means that golf can be played comfortably all year round.

The course itself has been upgraded in recent years by designer Peter Matkovich who rebuilt the old greens, replanting them with paspalum grass similar to that used by many courses in KwaZulu-Natal, and generally improving the playability of the course. The course, with two separate loops of nine on each side of the road leading through the resort, is built on undulating terrain, and therein lies both its charm and challenge.

The par 5s are relatively short at Royal Swazi Sun, and for golfers using the latest modern technology drivers this is where birdies can be accumulated, as well as at some of the shorter par 4s where you can have a gamble and go for the green, although the risk is high, and anything off line will be punished. One of the more dangerous

holes is the par-five 17th, where water guards the front of the green. The green is usually within range of a long second shot, following a solid drive, so the temptation to get there in two and putt for an eagle, rather than lay up, is in the back of a golfer's mind. That is followed by the tricky par-three 18th, where the tee shot is played slightly uphill over a bushy gorge.

Visiting golfers to Swaziland don't often stray away from the Royal Swazi Sun CC, yet the kingdom does have other 9-hole courses. At one stage there used to be several of them, but quite a few have closed over the years. The town of Manzini, site of Swaziland's airport, has a 9-holer, and there are others at Enkonyeni and Mbabale. There were plans to build a golf estate in the south of the country, on Lake Jozini, but that development has gone quiet.

The most attractive course of the 9-holers is Usutu Forest, about 30 to 40 kilometres from the Royal Swazi Sun. Easy to reach on a tarred road, it has been there for many years, in the forests on the edge of the Swazi highlands. It adjoins the comfortable Foresters Arms hotel, which offers guests a nine-course dinner to complement the nine golf holes!