

DAILY NEWS

EGYPT

The Red Sea Pan-Arab Open

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The Golfing is good on the glimmering Red Sea

HURGHADA: The sweltering heat might have affected the players' performances at the Sixth Red Sea Pan-Arab Open Amateur Golf Championship, were it not for the sea breeze blowing in over the coast.

The course on which the Championship was played, The Cascades, in Soma Bay, Hurghada, sits on an expanse of coastline overlooking the Red Sea, making for one of the most idyllic, and unique, golfing locations in the world.

The course itself is befitting of the beautiful surrounds. Designed by former professional, Gary Player, the 18 holes abound with tropical plants and palm trees, small lakes with quaint stone bridges, and more, adjacent to the lush fairways and immaculately kept greens.

Leading golf title, Golf Journal Magazine, voted it one of the top 20 courses in the world, and the buzz in the air at the opening ceremony suggested that the players who had made the journey, were almost as excited to play on The Cascades, as they were to be playing in the tournament.

More than 175 competed in this year's Championship, predominantly from the Arab countries, but also from a number of other destinations such as Switzerland and Germany, and as far flung as Canada and Korea.

There were separate men's and women's competitions, with each subdivided by handicap (the player's golfing ability) into gold, silver and bronze categories.

The men teed off early Thursday morning. Getting as much golf in as possible ahead of the scorching midday sunshine, they got acquainted with some of the most imaginative holes in the world of golf.

If playing on a course that stands between the desert and the sea is not unusual enough, then The Cascades' third hole undoubtedly is. The teeing off point, situated on one jut of land, is separated from the green by the ocean, its waves crashing onto the rocks below. You would want to have a fairly sure drive, for if you don't, your ball will be forever lost in the depths of the Red sea.

Other holes straddle desert landscapes, are adorned with waterfalls, or have rivers running through them.

Beautiful but tough, was the general consensus after the first day of play. "It's the most enjoyable course I've ever played on," one Egyptian participant told me. "And one of the most difficult too."

It was a young Saudi Arabian, Othman Al Mulla, with a handicap of two, who finished day one on top, closely followed by four Bahrainis.

The Red Sea Open's large entry, and the high number of international competitors, says one of the organizers, Mohammed "Major" Mansour, is down to the competition's growing reputation and in no small part due to the spectacular setting.

The tournament, he says, is based on the annual Pan-Arab team competition, but is for individual competitors, adding another much needed individual golf event to Arab world's golfing calendar.

Courses springing up all over Egypt and the Gulf reflect the game's growing popularity in the Arab world, and their quality is earning them international repute. It is for this reason too, Mansour adds, that the Red

Sea Open has grown every year since its inception.

As the men's competition continued through day two, the ladies tournament kicked off as well, with the weight of Egypt's hopes resting on Sophie Bernard and Naela El Attar. And they were not to be disappointed. The two Egyptian ladies finished the day second and third respectively. Again, Othman Al Mulla finished the day top of the men's section.

In between golfing players returned to their hotels — the Sheraton, La Residence (around which the course is located) and the Robinson Club — for some much needed R&R, unwinding in the swimming pools, and enjoying a drink at the bar.

With temperatures climbing to over 40 degrees on the final day of the championship, the golf was as much a test of the players' stamina as it was their golfing abilities.

The drinks gazebo stationed between the third and fourth holes, offering shade and icy cold beverages, was designed for days like this.

Approaching the final holes of the course, it started to become clear who would lift the Red Sea Open trophy aloft. The 20 year-old from Saudi Arabia, Othman Al Mulla, ran out the winner, by an impressive eight shots.

A management student at the University of New Mexico, this dyed-in-the-wool golfer hopes to turn professional in the coming years.

Hailing from Saudi, where "there are only three good courses", he heaped praise on Egypt's golfing development, and the Red Sea Open.

"This is one hell of a course," he said, "especially when the wind blows! It's difficult because if you miss a shot you can easily end up in the water."

There was good news for Egypt too, as Taymour Aboul Kheir snuck into third place in the closing stages, a single shot ahead of Bahrain's Diab Sager Alnaimi.

Better still, Egyptian Naela El Attar finished in first place in the ladies' section, and her compatriot Sophie Bernard took bronze in third.

It might sound like a cliché, but with a record number of competitors, and the highest standard of competition the Red Sea Open has seen yet, the Championship's real winner, was golf.