



WRESTLING WITH THE MONSTER
Barbaroux - a Golf Course fit for Heroes

Ever dreamed of standing on the 17th tee at Sawgrass and aiming at that tiny, upturned-saucer green surrounded by water? Or re-playing the snaky 6-foot downhill putt that Bernhard Langer missed at Kiawah Island in 1993 to lose the Ryder Cup for Europe?

Well, not all of us are going to get to play the very toughest courses in the States. But here's good news - Pete and P.B.Dye, authors of both of those legendary tracks and many more across the pond, have built just one in Europe. And it's right here in the Var, just 4km East of Brignoles at Barbaroux.

The sort of vision needed to build a course at all in this location is underlined by the photos of the construction period displayed in the men's dressing room. Thousands of kilos of explosive must have been used to shift tens of thousands of cubic metres of rock. And the result is a course hurled through the hills on a truly Wagnerian scale - think Rhine Gorge and you won't be far away.

Off the back tees, Barbaroux is 6600 yards with a 'slope' of 143. This means that if you play off, say, 18, you are allowed 4 extra strokes - and you may need them all. Much of the drama comes straight at you. First tee - cut off as much water as you dare. Second - play into a narrow green glued to the side of a precipice. Third - a blind approach down a 100-foot drop. Fourth - a par three perched on a hilltop - you drive your buggy through a tunnel to reach the green. Fifth - blind second between two marker

posts 20 metres apart - hazards both sides, then hit into a green canted out over a ball-eating ravine.

Okay, it eases off a bit after that. And the forward tees are so positioned that anyone who can hit 120 yards more or less straight off the tee (and afford a few spare balls) can have an enjoyable round - ask my wife! Another small act of mercy - quite a few of the fathomless drops off the sides of the course are designated as lateral hazards rather than out-of-bounds. (This means you can drop a ball beside where your first one left the known universe rather than trudge back to play from where you just hit - though you still incur a penalty shot.) Even so, an able golfer will be hard-pressed to return a decent card playing off the back markers.

And the greens! Close-cropped bent grass, big swooping slopes, many on a giant scale, including the 3-tier 9th which at 75 yards is the longest in Europe.

They run fast and true - a tribute to the greenkeeper who I would guess has a lot of frost to contend with in deep winter. Indeed the course is usually very well presented and maintained.

Barbaroux is located deep in rugged hills - though the A8 Autoroute passes right alongside the lower part of the course. The clubhouse is in the open-plan French style, with a welcoming bar which does an excellent croque-monsieur. There's a reasonably-priced restaurant - try the biologique Chateau de Margilliere wines, grown opposite the course and under the same management. The pro-shop - also in the French tradition - is light on equipment, stronger on clothes, and not specially cheap for either. The practice area is ample and attractive, but you have to buy a ticket for at least three buckets of balls - a ploy to keep out the casual riff-raff?

The complex includes a 24-room hotel, as well as some rather grim-looking holiday apartments by the 18th; round much of the rest of the course an increasing number of imposing, heavily-guarded gin-palace villas are appearing - ideal for the more colourful type of Marseille businessman?

Whether it's because of its somewhat fearsome reputation, or its remoteness from tourist areas and the coast, this is one of the least crowded courses I know in Provence. Tee-times are

reasonably easy to come by - and though the terrain and the distances between tee and green don't make for a quick round, you are a bit less likely than at other more popular courses to find yourself behind a family of five beginners in three buggies with two dogs in tow.

Prices are close to the average for the Var and the region's inland courses generally - and that must be a bargain for an out-of-the-ordinary golfing experience. The standard green fee is €59 per round (it's €72 per day, but if you are contemplating going round this one twice in a day, you're a better man than I am, Gunga Din). A buggy - pretty much essential - is €30.

There's a good special offer for seniors on Wednesdays - €118 for two including buggy, which is thus effectively free. Whatever your age, you can have the same deal any day in July and August if you start between 12 noon and 2pm - not for the light-skinned or faint-hearted!

There is a nine-hole option - green-fee €41, buggy €16 - but check carefully with them that you can do the first nine. The inward half has its moments of interest, including a 'spoo' links hole replete with dune-like mounds and pot bunkers, but there are some poor holes, like the 12th along the motorway which is long, dull and mosquito-ridden. Overall it's not the equal of the outward.

There are, as with most courses down here, various deals attached to stays at the hotel over various periods and including lessons etc. However, I find the surroundings rather austere - even forbidding in poor weather - and the fleshpots of Brignoles aren't a big attraction when you're not on the course. So I would vote for a day visit - probably with an early start so you can get the titanic opening few holes under your belt before the sun gets too powerful.

BOGEYMAN RATINGS

Bogeyman's at-a-glance ratings out of ten for Barbaroux (he hasn't tried the hotel):

- Course design..... 9.5
- Course condition..... 9.0
- Pro shop/amenities..... 6.5
- Bar/restaurant..... 8.5
- Overall assessment..... 8.375

GOLF DE BARBAROUX
ROUTE DE CABASSE, 83170
BRIGNOLES. Tel: 04 94 69 673 63

April VAR VILLAGE VOICE 2005

Email :contact@barbaroux.com

**Copyright VAR VILLAGE
VOICE 2005**

Contact:

Editor Anita Rieu-Sicart

E : anitavvv@tiscali.fr