



# ‘Our perfect is different’

**Environment** | A clutch of outlier clubs are making nature protection, energy efficiency and water usage their hole-in-one. Developers of residential enclaves are taking note. By *Zoe Dare Hall*

At Augusta, home of the Masters golf tournament, every emerald blade of grass is mown in the same direction, its height specified to a fraction of a centimetre. This world-famous private club has persuaded golfers that every course should display similar perfection — a state researchers refer to as Augusta National Syndrome — to the chagrin of groundskeepers everywhere.

But on Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts, approximately 1,040 miles to the north, the invitation-only Vineyard Golf Club is taking a different approach. Its 235 acres of neatly clipped greens are surrounded by wild parkland, rolling dunes and tall fescue grasses — a wilder look than that typically found on courses in North America.

“Our version of perfect is different to others in the States,” says Kevin Banks, the club’s superintendent. Early on summer mornings, his team is out whipping the fairways with climbing ropes to remove humidity and dew. “The longer the grass sits wet, the higher the chance of a disease outbreak,” he explains.

The course has been 100 per cent organic since day one: one of the conditions the Martha’s Vineyard Commission set for approving the course’s development in 2002 was that the land be kept free of synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers to protect the island’s water supply. The club uses bio-based pesticides such as the biofungicide Rhapsody and granular fertilisers made from crab shells and seaweed to create more disease-resistant turf.

While the area enjoys moderate annual rainfall, the course is also “tight on water usage”, Banks says. “We constantly monitor the moisture content on the putting greens with handheld probes, so we only water the areas that need it. Unlike some courses in Texas or Florida that use fans to cool them in summer, we use the wind.”

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Club co-president Drew Marcus says that in spite of the organic regime, Vineyard Golf “plays like any other top golf course and our membership has a sense of pride that we are breaking new ground and being environmentally responsible”.

The club may be an outlier, but its model is becoming increasingly relevant in the face of climate change, increasing water pressure, and the accelerating costs of energy and fertiliser since the start of the wars in Ukraine and Iran. Residential developments around golf courses in particular are making water management, nature protection and energy efficiency a priority — because they increasingly matter to homeowners and potential buyers.

There’s a big push to be “down with brown”, says Adam Lawrence, founder of Oxford Golf Consulting. Part of that effort is persuading players that golf courses are “living things” that shouldn’t always look immaculate.

Juha Torni, a 59-year-old golfer and chief financial officer based in Helsinki, Finland, says he was motivated to buy a €690,000 one-bedroom Viceroy-branded residence at Ombria, a three-year-old, GEO-certified golfing estate in inland Algarve, Portugal, in part because of its climate-conscious ethos. “It just makes financial sense that a course that’s embedded in nature will be rewarded with higher returns in the long run,” he says. “If it means a course looks more natural to save water and protect nature, I’m happy with that.”

For many courses, water is the most pressing issue. In California’s Coachella Valley, desert clubs have come under fire for continuing to plant fairways with fine-bladed bentgrass, which needs constant mowing and watering. As of 2021, larger courses were drawing more than 1mn gallons of water per night in the summer, according to a report in the Los Angeles Times. California’s Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, which was passed in 2014 and comes into full effect in 2042, is forcing these courses to reduce their reliance on groundwater.



**Clockwise from main: Vineyard Golf Club, Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts; Sotogrande in southern Spain; Costa Navarino, Greece** — Laurence Lambrecht Jacob Sjoman

But at other desert courses such as Camelback Golf Club in Arizona, which is surrounded by golf-view homes worth millions of dollars, lush fairways have been converted into desertscapes with native planting and drought-tolerant grass such as bermuda and zoysia. In Camelback’s case, removing 140 acres of irrigated turf saves 43mn gallons of water annually.

Basingstoke Golf Club in Hampshire, in the UK, is among the courses experimenting with artificial grass. That may seem to fly in the face of sustainability, but bio-based products, made from natural materials such as hemp and soya “capture an enormous amount of embedded carbon. They look similar to real grass but work all year round and the club doesn’t need to worry about maintenance,” claims Michael Walker, chief executive of SYNLawn UK.

In Singapore, where rainwater is in abundance during monsoon season from December to March, Sentosa Golf Club claims it is the world’s first carbon-neutral golf club. Surrounded by jungle, with views across the busy shipping lanes of the Singapore Strait and the city’s central business district, Sentosa irrigates its two championship courses with harvested rainwater, stored in its on-site reservoir lakes. “There are no wells or purchased water,” says Andrew Johnston, Sentosa’s general manager and director of agronomy.

The club’s irrigation system reduces both water and energy usage by up to 40 per cent. Johnston and his team are studying how much carbon is captured and stored within turf grass, soil and