



6. Son Gual

Mallorca finally gets the course it deserves.

WORDS BY RICHARD GREEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SON GUAL

Given the quality of golf on offer in southern Spain, it is a little surprising to find that Mallorca's contribution to this body of work is so minimal. Nicklaus and Trent Jones have provided a couple of solid courses, but the recent opening of a new club minutes from the airport might just help to revive the island's golfing fortunes.

The genesis of Son Gual was as long ago as the early 1990s, when a German double-glazing magnate, Adam Pamer, bought a holiday property on the island. A fanatical 11-handicapper, he played four times a week but grew increasingly frustrated by the poor condition of the courses on offer. For a man used to the finer things in life, the solution was obvious: find some land, hire an architect and build the best course money could buy.

But this being Spain, the path to enlightenment was as bumpy as the greens that so infuriated the aspiring course owner. The gap between design and construction stretched to almost four years, with enough red tape to tie Donald Trump in knots. Construction was far quicker, however, taking just over two years. And with the perfect climate, greens went from seeding to playable in the space of just eight weeks.

The task of fulfilling Pamer's vision fell not to a big-name design company but to Thomas Himmel. A three-time amateur champion with little experience outside his native Germany, Himmel's originality ➤



impressed Pamer, and he was handed the dream ticket. The opportunity would not be wasted.

But with little definition on the patch of former farmland, massive amounts of earth needed to be moved to create hills and valleys through which sweeping holes and a babbling creek could flow. The usual rate for this was €3 per cubic metre of earth; the fact that Himmel found a Spanish roadbuilder (with no previous golf experience) who charged just €1 per cubic metre enabled far more land to be shifted – 1.4 million

Good test
Large lakes and 66 bunkers will test golfers of all abilities who visit Son Gual.

‘The entrance area and locker rooms are epic, while 15-minute gaps between tee times only add to the feeling of exclusivity’

cubic metres – and the dream quickly became reality.

The other masterstroke was the purchase of about 800 olive trees, rescued from a development on the mainland. With some as old as 1,000 years, the air of maturity they added to the course was remarkable.

This imaginative approach is what really sets Son Gual apart. How many courses have you ever seen with vineyards lining the fairways? In just three or four years, golfers will be able to sit on the glorious terrace, glass in hand,



and enjoy the fruits of Son Gual's unusual labour. Another wonderful touch is the sowing of wild flowers in the fescue rough, adding colour and interest throughout the course. Who would have thought something so simple could be so memorable?

The course itself flows into two loops, a bit like Muirfield in reverse, with large lakes that were originally constructed as irrigation reservoirs proving formidable hazards. Everything is on a grand scale at Son Gual: the greens are huge with elongated approaches and run-off areas

View from...

With a magnificent terrace overlooking the 9th and 18th greens, the off-course activity at Son Gual is just as spectacular as the golf course.



only adding to the impression of size. The bunkers (there are 66 on the course) are equally imposing and really add to the visual appeal.

But it is the size of the tee boxes that will really amaze. Averaging 900 square metres (500 is fairly standard) they are bigger than the putting greens and just as smooth. Even the clubhouse entrance area and locker rooms are truly epic, while the 15-minute gaps between tee times only add to the feeling of exclusivity. But is it any good? Read on and find out...

First Play verdict



Given the location – close to the airport – and the inherently flat nature of the land, what Thomas Himmel has produced at Son Gual is quite spectacular. Of course, with a budget far in excess of most projects on the island, that is the least you would expect. But it would have been very easy to build yet another course in the American style.

Himmel's design is interesting, thoughtful, immensely challenging and makes the very best of the 175-acre plot, while the conditioning is magnificent. There are a number of standout holes (see right) while the clubhouse and facilities are as good as you will find anywhere. By his own admission,

Himmel likes to surprise golfers, and although the course looks tough, you can plot your way round it, avoiding the myriad hazards. There is a wonderful flow to the holes and with a memorable closing stretch, Son Gual seems destined for greatness.

The post-round fare is also impressive, and although it is at the premium end of the market (the owner wanted limited visitor tee times and a number of members paying

£100,000) you certainly get what you pay for. Son Gual is about making guests feel special, and with its understated quality and gentle pace of life, a day here really is something to be savoured.

Masterstroke
Hundreds of rescued olive trees bring an air of maturity to this new course.

Course review

★★★★★ Classic hole ★★★★★ Memorable ★★★ Good ★★ Average ★ Poor

Son Gual

Men: 7,243/6,845/6,545 yards, par 72

Ladies: 6,285/5,983/5,427 yards, par 72

Telephone: 0034 97178 5888

E-mail: info@son-gual.com

Web: www.son-gual.com

Green fees: £150



Big project
About 1.4 million cubic metres of earth were moved to build Son Gual.

Hole 1 Par 4, 438 yards

A cracking opener from a massively elevated tee. Part of the fairway can't be seen from the tee, but have faith that there is plenty there. The green is tucked away behind a big bunker, but faders can run the ball up the false front. ★★★

Hole 2 Par 4, 352 yards

Clear the huge bunker in front of you, in the fairway, and this becomes a relatively straightforward hole. Don't get too greedy, though. Leaving the approach short makes for a tough save from a tricky run-off area. A forgettable hole. ★★

Hole 3 Par 4, 335 yards

Another shorty, but goody, but one that really demands a good tee shot. Take off as much fairway as possible and a short-iron awaits. That is crucial, because this green is enormous and you can easily be left with a monster (three) putt. ★★★

Hole 4 Par 5, 515 yards

First of the par 5s. Two good woods will put you in range to get at the green. Going for it in two is possible, but with water eating into the front left of the green, precision is required if you don't want the birdie to become a bogey. A competent par-5. ★★

Hole 5 Par 3, 130 yards

Don't be fooled by the yardage: the green angles away from you, and reaching a back pin can easily turn a 9-iron into a 7-iron. There is a bail-out area on the right, but anything not perfectly struck is getting wet. A superb one-shotter. ★★★★★

Hole 6 Par 5, 491 yards

Again, not the longest par 5, but one that demands accuracy. Bite off as much of the lake as you dare, lay up avoiding the bunkers and then go for a long narrow green. Be sure to hit it, though. The bunker left is big and deep and the green runs off the other side. Thoughtful three-shotter. ★★★

Hole 7 Star hole (see below)

Hole 8 Par 4, 361 yards

On paper it's a fairly straightforward par 4, but the 8th is tight and a tweaked drive can easily end up behind one of the many original trees that line the hole. When the pin is at the back you can't see the hole, and judging the approach is not easy. ★★

Hole 9 Par 3, 207 yards

A full-blooded strike is needed to hit the green, but going for the flag is risky. The safe play is to find the landing area in front of the green and back yourself to make an up-and-down for par. ★★★

Hole 10 Par 4, 396 yards

After tapas and cold beer, the 10th is a gentle introduction back into the round. Hug the right-hand bunkers and fade in a second and it should be a par. Come up short and it's bogey time, especially when the pin is cut back right. ★★★

Hole 11 Par 4, 457 yards

Drive over the corner of the trees and you are in business, but stay straight and a monster second awaits. Water down the right makes getting at the flag an all-or-nothing shot. ★★★

Hole 12 Par 5, 524 yards

Looks easier than it plays. There is room off the tee, but the stream on the right has plenty of visitors. Likewise the lake on the left. The second is crucial to hopes of par, as the fairway is pinched at the 200-yard mark. ★★★

Hole 13 Par 4, 412 yards

A solid drive up the left is essential, as the bunker complex at the elbow will punish anything loose. Swinging the ball in from the left is the ideal approach to a huge pudding-bowl green. ★★

Hole 14 Star hole (see below)

Hole 15 Star hole (see below)

Hole 16 Par 4, 455 yards

Similar to the 11th, but with less of a kink, a booming drive down the chute is essential. A long second should favour the left side, taking the water out of play. Another massive green awaits; better perfect the running chip if you end up short. ★★★

Hole 17 Par 3, 194 yards

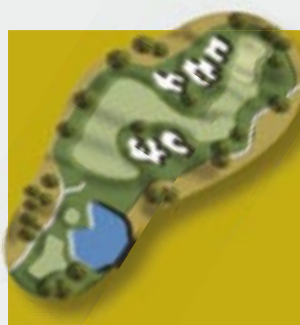
This is another tough par 3, but the 17th does at least offer you a bail out area on the left. A high fade is the perfect shot to hit the middle of a green that slopes from right to left as you look at it. ★★★

Hole 18 Star hole (see below)



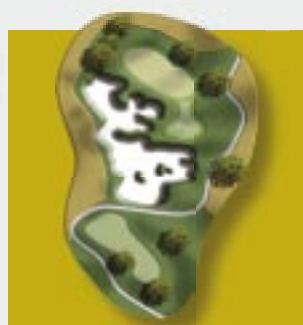
Hole 7 Par 4, 469 yards

Stroke Index one and it's not hard to see why. The 7th was carved out of an artificial valley and requires two career shots to get home in two. You don't even see the green until you reach the brow of the hill, and with the entire hole going steeply uphill it can be a real slog. The sharply sloping green has a ridge running through the middle of it. Tough, but exciting. ★★★★★



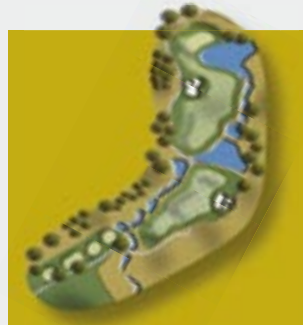
Hole 14 Par 4, 378 yards

A classic risk/reward par-4, with a Tiger line over bunkers open to the bigger hitters. The double fairway idea works perfectly given the topography. A 255-yard biff leaves just a short iron, but for the rest it's a mid/long iron over three bunkers to a semi-blind raised green that appears to be floating in the distance. A lay-up second might well be the safer route to a par. ★★★★★



Hole 15 Par 3, 183 yards

An iconic par 3 played from a tee box bigger than most greens. With the palacio in the background and an ocean of sand filling the hollow in front of the elevated green, this is do or die, and missing the green all but removes the possibility to make a big par. With water coming into play on the other par 3s, this presents a brilliantly different challenge. A beauty. ★★★★★



Hole 18 Par 5, 544 yards

The signature hole, 18 makes for a truly memorable finish. It's a monster par 5 played uphill with lots of trouble. With plenty of room, plenty of water and plenty of scope for disaster or glory, 18 is a hole that will live long in the memory. Two big hits and a precise approach get you there, but with a sloping green, a dramatic finish to any round is guaranteed. ★★★★★