



# 5. Arcos Gardens

A new course is causing a stir in 'real' Spain.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARCOS GARDENS

You know a place is creating quite a buzz when Golf Federations and European Tour players start to descend on it like bees around a brand new pot of strawberry jam. The Swedish Golf Federation has already sampled Arcos Gardens, as have the England Elite team and, last November, the European Tour Qualifying School Stage Two was held here, with 25 of the 88 players in the field heading on to San Roque. More established Tour players, such as Mikko Ilonen, Peter Hanson and Joakim Haeggman, can often be spotted on the state-of-the-art practice range, honing their swings.

"Although we're a new course," says the pro, Ashley Northridge (who used to be based at Wentworth and once taught Tom Cruise), "it has the feel of being a lot older. The course has been built on an old olive grove, and many of the trees that border the fairways are more than 300 years old.

"The first thing you notice about the place is there is so much space. The course is on a 400-acre site. The Spanish Government has actually put us forward as a model for how it wants future Spanish golf developments to look, because we are building houses on less than five per cent of the land."

That may be the case, but if you go there in the next 12 months you will still encounter quite a bit of disruption, as the first phase of building nears completion.

Ultimately, once the clubhouse is completed in January 2009 (complete with spa area and golf gym) this place will only



get better. But there is still enough at Arcos Gardens right now to persuade the game's best that this is a great place to spend the winter.

This corner of the Iberian peninsula is 'real' Spain, a million miles from the swarms of English tourists on the Costa del Sol. The pace of life here is much slower and more laid back than in other parts of the country.

As you play, you look out over olive groves, vineyards, cotton fields, bulls, horses and sunflower fields. The local fare is authentic and consists of wild

**Honing skills**  
The state-of-the-art practice facilities are attracting many a Tour pro.



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boar, pork, ox tails and wonderful vegetables grown in small kitchen gardens. The motorway, which has just been completed, means that Jerez is now 20 minutes away, and Seville and Cadiz are also both close and easily accessible, as are the beaches of the Costa de la Luz.

The course itself was designed by two of Landmark's architects, Chris Cole and Jeff Potts, and it offers fantastic views out towards the ancient town of Arcos and the stunning surrounding countryside. It was only a matter of time before this very prestigious American

group (which is famous for Kiawah Island, PGA West and Carmel Valley Ranch among 50-odd developments) left its mark in this corner of the country.

Unlike many Spanish courses, the fairways are wide open and the five different teeing grounds mean the course can play anything from 5,200 to 7,382 yards. Although it's impossible to design a course that is as playable for the high-handicapper as it is for the scratch player, they have come close. There is a nice balance of holes, with two clockwise loops. Each hole has a definite identity,

**The old town**

The old town of Arcos de la Frontera sits on a cliff more than 100m high. It's steeped in history and well worth a visit, with cobbled streets lined with geraniums.



set amid lakes, rock gardens, meandering streams and 107 flat-bottomed bunkers.

"I like to think of this course as a story," says Northridge. "The first few holes ease you gradually into the experience and get you going. You'd better make some pars early on, because the final five holes are real corkers.

"The course wasn't designed so that you could start at either the 1st or the 10th, like at many places. If you do start at the 10th, it really is a bit like opening a book for the first time in the middle."

**First Play verdict**



There is a very different feel to this course when compared to many of its Spanish cousins. Although the olive trees are ever present, they are set back and there is a feeling of space. As long as the house-building doesn't get too intrusive, it really could develop into something very special.

The attention to detail and the conditioning are impressive, as are the practice facilities. The course has few bad holes and many good ones. Best of the lot is the par-5 16th, a fabulous risk/reward hole when the wind is behind you. It's also imperative that you breath deeply to smell the flowers and take away with you the magnificent views from the tee box.

The four par 3s are especially memorable holes. So many designers get these short holes wrong and produce holes that are too similar. At Arcos, there is a great balance, with all four of them strikingly different and of varying lengths. And this balance goes through to the long holes as well, with all the par 5s having very much their own identities.

This is a cracking new course that can only get better with time. In the short to medium term, the building work may sometimes get in the way of a golfer's desire for peace and tranquillity, but this is more than made up for by the breath-taking setting.

**Good test**

Anything hit left on the par-3 6th could end with your ball in a watery grave.

**Course review**

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

**Arcos Gardens**

6,635 yards, par 72

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**Green fees:** €70-80



**Hole 1**

Par 4, 392 yards

A fairly elementary start. This opener dog-legs gently to the right and is slightly uphill all the way. A decent drive will leave you with a wedge or a 9-iron into the big, raised green. ★★

**Hole 2**

Par 3, 167 yards

Proof that the short, short hole is not dead. This is another simple hole, requiring a solid short-iron to a well-bunkered green. Short and right is a lot better than left and long. ★★

**Hole 3**

Par 4, 426 yards

Things begin to hot up here, and you need to get a good drive away, preferably down the right. This will give you a better angle in to the ridged green. ★★★★★



**Hole 4**

Par 5, 546 yards

Because this is uphill all the way, it plays a lot longer than the yardage, and is a real three-shot hole. The kidney-shaped fairway bunker will make you think. ★★★★★

**Hole 5**

Par 4, 467 yards

This is a long and difficult par 4, and you need to make a decision on the tee about whether or not to take on the fairway bunkers. The approach is downhill. ★★★★★



**Hole 6**

Par 3, 209 yards

A beautiful hole that requires a long iron to the centre of the green, because anything left is in the lake. Even if you manage this, a two-putt is still tricky. ★★★★★

**Hole 7**

Par 4, 374 yards

If you get a good drive away and steer clear of the stream down the right, you'll have a good chance of a birdie. Your approach should be no more than a flick with a wedge. ★★

**Hole 8**

Par 4, 467 yards

This is the longest – and arguably the toughest – par 4 on the front half, with 10 bunkers. The hole dog-legs left and is uphill to a well-defended green. ★★★★★



**Hole 9**

Par 5, 561 yards

A risk/reward hole with a stream crossing the fairway twice and which has a lake on three sides of the green. The steady three-shotter often wins here. ★★★★★

**Hole 10**

Par 4, 446 yards

A tough two-shotter where you must avoid the fairway bunkers on the left, and then hit a solid mid-iron into a smallish green that has a diagonal step in it from right to left. ★★★★★



**Hole 11**

Par 5, 538 yards

Another par 5 where the big-hitters have a chance of getting home in two. But beware, because the green is the smallest on the course and it has subtle contours. ★★

**Hole 12**

Par 4, 465 yards

A dog-leg from left to right that plays slightly downhill. Your approach with a mid to long iron mustn't be long, as there is a big, tough bunker ready to grab anything overhit. ★★

**Hole 13**

Par 4, 467 yards

This is the toughest par 4 on the course, as it plays uphill all the way. The fairway is full of undulations, so you need to be versatile with your approach shot. ★★★★★



**Hole 14**

Par 4, 361 yards

A great little hole, played to an amphitheatre green that asks you to put your thinking cap on when you are on the tee. Flirt with the bunkers on the left at your peril. ★★★★★

**Hole 15**

Par 3, 196 yards

A spectacular hole, made by the treacherous bunker just short and right of the green. The green can be very quick from the back to the front, so finesse is a prerequisite. ★★★★★



**Hole 16**

Par 5, 590 yards

This is the signature hole, a fantastic downhill par 5 with spectacular views from the tee. Even long hitters will be intimidated by the lake on the left of the green. ★★★★★

**Hole 17**

Par 3, 227 yards

The longest par 3 on the course, yet it doesn't look like it because a front bunker shortens the hole to your eye. The green is small and full of subtle contours. ★★★★★



**Hole 18**

Par 4, 483 yards

A spectacular finish. Your drive has to be spot on, because tricky bunkers squeeze the fairway at driving distance. A lake runs down the left and behind the green. ★★★★★