

THE INTERVIEW

It Should Feel as Though It Has Always Been There

Tom Doak, one of the most impactful golf architects of all time, on the valley at Barshong, the walking cultures of Scotland and Bhutan, and why the best courses look as though no one designed them.

Royal Bhutan Country Club

Tom Doak has built fifty golf courses and declined a great many more; ten of them are ranked among the best in the world. Earlier this year he walked the site at Barshong, in the southern foothills of Bhutan, where Gelephu Mindfulness City is taking shape - a valley, a river running to the north, mountains beyond it. What the conversation that follows keeps circling is not whether the course will be good, his usually are, but who a place like this is finally for.

When you first walked the site at Barshong in Gelephu Mindfulness City, what struck you about the landscape, and what possibilities did you immediately see in it?

I understood the general topography of the site from the maps that I had, but I am never sure what the views from the property will be until I see it in person. In this case, the views north and west toward the mountains were better than I expected, and will be a highlight of the course. I also didn't understand that there was a valley between the property and the mountains, where a small river runs just to the north of the property. That view will be a feature of the 5th and 16th holes.



Doak on the Barshong site with the RBCC team, routing plan in hand. Photograph: RBCC.

You're known for being highly selective about the projects you accept. What was it about this site that made you say yes?

My interest in a project is partly about the site, and partly about the client's goals for the project. In this case, His Majesty's vision that a great golf course is an important component of the GMC project, and that golf in general fits well with the culture of Bhutan, was inspiring to me. So, if I thought the site was suitable, I was interested in the job.

Your philosophy has been shaped by your time studying the links of Scotland, where the game evolved naturally from the landscape. Does this project offer a chance to reconnect with those origins, and if so, in what ways?

As you say, golf is a walking game, and Bhutan is a culture of people who walk, so I think the locals will have an affinity for the game.

Without putting you on the spot, is the course you're envisioning here one that could eventually stand alongside the world's most celebrated designs?

I've been fortunate to build ten courses which have been ranked among the world's best, out of a total of 50 projects I've done. Everything about golf course design is subjective, so it's not really possible to predict what people are going to think of a new course, but the idea of a great course in such a remote and beautiful country is intriguing, so I think people will be on our side. Now we just have to have everything go right for two years of construction!

A course designed by you, set against the backdrop of Bhutan's landscape, do you see that combination drawing the world's top players, and perhaps even putting GMC on the map as a competitive golf destination?

My mentor, Pete Dye, built a lot of courses that hosted professional tournaments, and he had no ego at all about it. He used to say, "Those boys would play in a parking lot, if someone put up \$5 million." And indeed, it's the sponsors of the tournament who determine where they are played. I do have two tournament courses to my name, the site of the Scottish Open and the PGA Tour's Houston Open, but it's more important to me that the members love them.

Golf destinations are proliferating worldwide. What will set the GMC course apart from the increasingly crowded field of luxury golf offerings?

What will set this course apart is what sets Bhutan apart - the friendliness of the people and the beauty of the landscape.

From your experience, what kind of ancillary economy tends to develop around a world-class golf course, and roughly how many livelihoods might a project like this support?

For direct employees, you will have between 25–50 people on the crew to maintain the course, and a similar number working in the golf clubhouse and restaurant. You could also have as many as 50–100 caddies for the golfers as they play. Indirectly, the increase

in visitors because of golf will create supporting jobs in many areas, from local transportation to restaurants and hotels.

Having seen what signature courses can do for a region's global profile, what do you anticipate this project could mean for GMC's identity, and for Bhutan's image on the world stage?

I am sure that the presence of a great golf course will help attract more people to visit Bhutan. My wish is that the course becomes part of the fabric of the community, and that the links between golf and spirituality are more thoroughly explored as a result.

*I do what I can to be sure the course fits into
the landscape and the community*

GMC has a distinctive development philosophy rooted in sustainability and mindfulness. How does your own design ethos align with that vision?

My own designs are inspired by the early courses in Scotland, which were played over land grazed by sheep and cattle, so that almost no artificial maintenance was required to play the game – the ultimate in sustainability. Nowadays, most golfers don't want to step around all of the animal droppings, so while golf courses still reflect the look of those early models, they are much cleaner around the edges now! As for mindfulness, I have always had trouble sitting still, and I feel more peaceful when I am out taking a walk in beautiful surroundings, so golf was the perfect sport for me.

Golf is often seen as a sport of privilege. How do you reconcile that perception with a project rooted in a city whose founding philosophy is mindfulness, and do you see an opportunity here to redefine what a golf course can mean for a community?

In a capitalist world, the best golf courses are able to charge visitors a small fortune in green fees, because people have declared that they are willing to travel around the world to play there. This has unfortunately caused the sport to be considered elitist, even though the roots of the game are much more modest and welcoming. I sometimes struggle with the idea that the better I design the course, the more it will cost to play; but I have

learned to accept that is something outside of my control. Instead, I do what I can to be sure the course fits into the landscape and the community, and feels as though it has always been there, and always will be.



Walking out across the site at dusk, mountains to the north. Photograph: RBCC.

