

DESTINATION VERDURA RESORT

SUNNINGDALE AND SICILY

Italian exuberance qualified by English reserve is the perfect recipe for a great day out, discovers **Peter Swain**



A last-minute invitation to play Sunningdale Old with Sir Rocco Forte is the sort of phone call that makes life entertaining. When a lunch prepared by Michelin-starred chef Fulvio Pierangelini is added to the mix, plus an opportunity to hear all about Sir Rocco's much-admired two-course Verdura resort in Sicily, how could I refuse?

I'd never played at Sunningdale, nor met Sir Rocco, international hotelier and 12-handicapper, so except for the flashing gearbox warning light on my elderly Jag when I arrive at the gates behind which England's finest inland course is nestling in the early morning Surrey mist, everything looks set fair.

One's first impression of the hal-
lowed clubhouse is of a friendly

Edwardian country house. It isn't particularly big or grand, but it is steeped in history, has a visitors' locker room, most unusually, upstairs, and does great breakfast bacon rolls.

Taking the task in hand seriously, I walk down to the rather unassuming practice range and hit balls into the murk for 20 minutes, then head back up, only to discover the fog has delayed play for an hour. So, a second breakfast, then some putts.

When we eventually set off, the sociable format is the best two of fourballs scoring on each hole, full stableford. Sir Rocco is actually in the group ahead, so our meeting is to be delayed until after the round. I see him striding away athletically - this is a fiercely competitive 67-year-old who still competes in triathlons.



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Sir Rocco Forte

Sunningdale is an old-fashioned peach. The classic heathland course is natural, not tricked up in any way, with challenges modern course designers eschew. Bunkers are in strange places, offering visual as much as actual intimidation, and greens subtle rather than dramatic.

By modern standards, at 6,627 yards, par-70, it's short. But it has variety and character, with every hole demanding a different approach. There are a couple of driveable par-fours, the famous roller-coaster 10th, with its green just in front of the equally celebrated halfway house, and in the early autumn sunshine, it all looks quite beautiful. Our group battles hard, and we come a creditable second.

Over a cup of Earl Grey, Sir Rocco tells me about his Verdura dream. "I always wanted to create a really top-

class golf resort, and there's warm winter weather in Sicily. I was educated in England, but my father [Sir Charles of Trust House Forte fame] came from Monte Casino, north of Naples, and my mother was from the Veneto, so I've always spoken Italian and feel very much at home in the country. My wife is Italian. You might describe my character as Italian exuberance suppressed by English reserve."

Which isn't a bad description of Verdura's courses. Well, maybe less 'supressed' than 'qualified'. The resort has now been open for four years, and both the 7,318-yard West and 7,311-yard East are maturing nicely. Wide, well-separated fairways featuring links-style pot bunkers set into immaculate new turf are the order of the day.



"I told designer Kyle Phillips [he of Kingsbarns, the Grove and Yas Links pedigree] that I wanted two equally good championship courses. Similar developments tend to have one good, and one not so good. I wanted two great layouts. When we're busy, one has twoballs, the other, fourballs" – a common-sense approach only a keen golfer would come up with. I wish more would follow his example.

"I wanted something tough enough for the pros but also playable from the forward tees for the holiday golfer. Then there's a par-3 course to keep beginners off the two main courses."

Good man.

Sir Rocco's father was a member of Sunningdale, and he himself joined in his 20s. "It's a wonderful club where I feel very much at home." He also belongs to Wisley, "and I enjoy welcoming members of both clubs to Verdura. They all seem to like it".

By now it's time to sit down, the better to appreciate chef Fulvio's magic. A culinary wizard from Rome, he oversees all the Italian restaurants in Sir Rocco's exclusive 11-hotel empire. His delicate Salad of Mazzara red prawns and oranges, washed down by a dry Sicilian white, is hitting the sweet spot.

"From a 220-hectare wilderness, we've created an earthly paradise at Verdura with mountains behind and the sea in front," enthuses my host. "The people are so friendly; nearly all are new to golf. One of our pros was a ball picker-upper a few years ago."

The resort's design raised a few eyebrows when it opened. Rather than the usual Mediterranean pastiche, it is determinedly modern. "Yes, the architecture is modern, but the colours and materials are indigenous to Sicily. Look back at it from the sea, everything fits into the landscape."

Sir Rocco's sister, the design guru and sometime TV presenter Olga Polizzi, has masterminded the look and feel of the



Sir Rocco's taste for all things Sicilian has driven the development of Verdura, where the quality of the golf and the resort's extensive leisure facilities is matched by exquisite service and attention to detail



203-room hotel, spa, tennis, football and business centre – again that mix of Italian flair and English style is in evidence.

Much like the Sea Bass with Menfi artichokes and potato purée, which we've now moved on to. So, I ask, any big tournaments coming up? "We had the Sicilian Open in 2012 (we amalgamated the best holes from the two courses) and maybe in 2015, we'll have another big tournament. But finding sponsors at the moment isn't easy."

How much time does Sir Rocco spend down there? "At least two weeks a year, and I'm pleased to say there's a new Alitalia flight direct from Gatwick to

Palermo starting in April, to add to the existing easyjet and Ryanair services. From the airport, it's a 60-mile drive, but I do in less than an hour. I tell the driver not to go under 80mph!"

Sir Rocco doesn't like coming second. He works hard at his game, loves spending time with his family, and is utterly focused on perfection.

Mmmm. Summer playing Sunningdale, then winter at Verdura, with a side order of Fulvio's Ribera orange tartlets and almond cakes. Sounds to me like he's got the recipe just right. ☑

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