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Move over, Trump: US tequila tycoon Mike Meldman is making golf fashionable again – and he’s coming to Europe. He talks to *Peter Swain*

One unlikely side effect of the pandemic is that super-luxe golf resorts have never been so popular. Mike Meldman, the American developer and sometime tequila tycoon, is showing the way – partly because his strategy is a million miles from Donald Trump’s more traditional approach to the sport.

At Augusta in 11 days’ time, American golfing superstars Jordan Spieth, Justin Thomas and Rickie Fowler will be wearing obligatory conventional golfing attire in pursuit of Masters glory, while their caddies will sport identical white boiler suits, as decreed by the club.

A couple of years ago the same three players (winners of over \$118 million between them on the PGA Tour) enjoyed a recreational round at Baker’s Bay – Discovery Land’s Tom Fazio-designed course in the Bahamas – while dressed rather differently.

“When they played over spring break,” says Meldman, the founder and chief executive of Discovery Land, “they were in their bathing suits, with no shoes and no shirts. They were just having fun.” The very idea would be shocking to most members of Donald Trump’s 19 ultra-conservative golf courses.

Meldman, 61, who has a modest Milwaukee background, freely admits that “most people who develop golf courses are golf snobs – clubs can be intimidating”. While many successful companies need strategists, focus groups and much executive head-scratching to evolve a brand philosophy, his inspiration



came from a chance clash with golf’s antiquated hierarchy.

“When I took on Estancia [golf club] in Arizona in the mid-1990s, my two sons were five and seven and I wanted to take them golfing, so I got them collared shirts and said, ‘Put ‘em on.’ When they refused, I said, ‘You gotta do it for golf.’ They just didn’t want to. So we walked on to the first tee and the pro says, ‘The boys need to be in collared shirts.’ I was wearing a T-shirt too and said, ‘Why?’ He says, ‘Because those are the rules.’ And I said, ‘We’re gonna change the rules.’ Now, to some people that was a crazy, sacrilegious concept. But I was there to enjoy the golf. Why should I have to fight with my kids over a collared shirt?”

Partly as a result of that progressive attitude, three decades on Meldman’s Discovery Land has successfully developed 23 super-luxe golf resorts across North America, the Caribbean, Hawaii and Mexico, and has just started its first project in Europe.

“We’ve sold close to \$20

Above, left to right: Discovery Land’s Playa Grande resort, in the Dominican Republic; a villa at El Dorado Golf and Beach Club in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico; Mike Meldman

billion worth of real estate and have over 10,000 members.” All of whom can now wear whatever they want on and off the courses.

Big numbers, but what’s truly amazing is that in this time of coronavirus, when most developers are struggling, Meldman is selling more property than ever before. “Within three months of lockdown we sold every house and condo we had available at Silo Ridge, north of New York City. Whatever we had at every project just sold out – at the Madison Club in La Quinta, California, all 40 lots went within weeks.”

Meldman has also changed the balance between selling empty lots and finished houses. “It used to be about 50:50, but since the pandemic started people want immediate gratification – see it, move in right away. So we’re building as much as we can and selling it all.” And prices aren’t cheap. Among the 285 homes planned at Silo Ridge, finished condos and townhouses go for \$2 million to \$3.5 million, while villas on two-acre plots fetch \$10 million-plus – spare change for

NFL star Tom Brady and his supermodel wife, Gisele Bündchen, who have recently bought there. The annual service charge is about \$30,000.

Partly primed by the game’s surge in popularity – the number of rounds played in the UK from June to August this year was up 53 per cent on 2019 – it’s the same turbo-charged story at other super-prime golf destinations in the US and Europe. At Wentworth, the three-course semi-private estate in Surrey on which 650 mansions reside, specialist local agent James Wyatt has seen a record year. “Our sales on the Wentworth Estate in the first half of 2020 were up 92 per cent on 2019, itself a good year. Most buyers were leaving London.”

Urban flight has been a feature of the 2020 market elsewhere too. “People came to secluded Silo Ridge because they wanted to get out of the city, away from the virus and the disturbances,” Meldman says. “There’s a level of normalcy with us and residents are in a safe, secure environment – all our communities are guard-gated.” Right now, biosecurity is even more important; he’s got that



covered too. “Our members have self-quarantined, and we have doctors and clinics on all our properties, so we do our own Covid testing, which extends to employees as well.” The restaurants there have never been fuller.

Superfast broadband has been the game-changer. “Some people bought a holiday place, which they’ve now discovered is a genuine second home they can work from. Zoom calls save a lot of time and travel – working remotely suits my lifestyle and many people who live in our projects feel the same way.”

What about the children? “We’re setting up schools everywhere to help kids go through Zoom school. I have a seven-year-old. Watching him trying to read with 20 other kids on Zoom is difficult, so we have teachers on every property who can navigate through that to help the kids.” Discovery Land’s family-friendly vibe may be casual, but the level of service is stratospherically high.

In uncertain times, Meldman has his finger on the international pulse. “We make life less complicated, more

convenient and more fun. People are craving that right now.” There’s a lack of pomposity about Meldman. Where other high-end developers use words like “bespoke”, “concierge” and “curate”, he simply says, “Whatever our members need, we take care of it.”

One thing they all want is a choice of outdoor pursuits. “We embrace the culture and environment of whichever destination we’re in. Many of our members don’t golf, so for families staying with us at Iron Horse in Montana, for example, we’ll plan their whole trip – fly fishing, wakeboarding, camping in the wilderness, zip lining, whatever. You just show up and we make it happen.”

Over in Yellowstone, which extends into Montana, Meldman – who has a handicap of 12 – has created the world’s only private golf and ski community, with 100 runs for residents’ exclusive use.

Spas, wellness centres and fine restaurants are also part of the formula. Less expected are the two or three “comfort stations” on every golf course. “They’ve got frozen margaritas, a dozen

“Changing the rules was, to some people, sacrilege. But I was there to enjoy the golf. Why should I have to fight with my kids over a collared shirt?”



FIND A HOME IN ONE

1 Wentworth The venue of the annual BMW PGA Championship. Twenty-five miles southwest of London, it has three courses and 650 homes that are mostly valued between £5 million and £15 million; bartonwyatt.co.uk

2 St George’s Hill A private estate near Weybridge in Surrey that has 428 mansions set around 27 holes; they typically cost between £10 million and £20 million; knightfrank.co.uk

3 Quinta do Lago A semi-private golf resort in the Algarve with three courses and contemporary villas from £2.7 million; quintaproperty.com



4 Costa Terra Lots at this new beachside set-up on Costa Azul, Portugal, will be arranged around a Tom Fazio course; they are on sale from about £1.8 million; discoverylandco.com



6 Terre Blanche A private two-course estate in Provence with a five-star hotel and fewer than 100 houses; villas cost from £4.5 million to £9 million; terre-blanche.com



7 Silo Ridge In Hudson Valley, 100 miles north of New York City, Discovery Land’s newest resort has condos, townhouses and plots from £1.5 million; discoverylandco.com

8 Kiawah Island A beachfront resort in South Carolina with five public courses, two private courses and a private enclave of mansions that cost from £3.8 million to £11.6 million; kiawahisland.com

9 Anahita Some 240 properties have already been sold on this Ernie Els championship course in Mauritius. Premium villas cost from about £4.3 million; sphereestates.com

10 Four Seasons Resort Nevis This resort on the currently Covid-free island of St Kitts in the Caribbean has 81 villas on a Robert Trent Jones II course; they are priced from £3.1 million to £11.6 million; fsrenevis.com

From top: St George’s Hill Golf Club, Surrey; a villa in Terre Blanche, Provence; beachfront mansions on Kiawah Island, South Carolina



TAKING FLIGHT