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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

ne 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 ultraconservative 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



Above, left to

Land's Playa

the Dominican

right: Discovery

Grande resort. in

Republic; a villa

at El Dorado Golf

and Beach Club

Lucas, Mexico;

in Cabo San

came from a chance clash with golf's

Arizona in the mid-1990s, my two sons

were five and seven and I wanted to take

I said, 'You gotta do it for golf.' They just

them golfing, so I got them collared shirts

and said, 'Put 'em on.' When they refused,

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

concept. But I was there to enjoy the golf.

Why should I have to fight with my kids

Partly as a result of that progressive

attitude, three decades on Meldman's

developed 23 super-luxe golf resorts

Discovery Land has successfully

Caribbean, Hawaii and Mexico,

across North America, the

and has just started its first

"We've sold close to \$20

project in Europe.

people that was a crazy, sacrilegious

"When I took on Estancia [golf club] in

antiquated hierarchy.

over a collared shirt?"

billion worth of real estate and have over

10,000 members." All of whom can now

is that in this time of coronavirus, when

"Within three months of lockdown we

sold every house and condo we had

most developers are struggling, Meldman

is selling more property than ever before.

available at Silo Ridge, north of New York

Meldman has also changed the balance

City. Whatever we had at every project

just sold out – at the Madison Club in

La Quinta, California, all 40 lots went

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

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

Big numbers, but what's truly amazing

wear whatever they want on and off

the courses.

within weeks."

NFL star Tom Brady and his supermodel wife, Gisele Bündchen, who have recently bought there. The annual service charge s 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 we can and selling it all." And prices aren't 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 selfquarantined, 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."

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

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 with us at Iron Horse in Montana, for fishing, wakeboarding, camping in the show up and we make it happen."

100 runs for residents' exclusive use.

restaurants are also part of the formula. Less expected are the two or three "comfort stations" on every golf course.

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?

sorts of ice cream, charcuterie, bao buns,

you name it," Meldman smiles. "And I've

Sprites and candy bars. That all started

for them." Some of Discovery's driving

can have music in their carts. Trump

To further demonstrate Meldman's

credentials as the well-connected party

player of developers, the tequila in the

resorts' margaritas is always Casamigos,

George Clooney and Rande Gerber – both

Discovery members – sold to Diageo for

His latest project is Costa Terra, 700

Azul in Portugal, an hour south of Lisbon.

acres of beachfront property on Costa

"We've started work on the first Tom

Fazio course in mainland Europe." As

with his other resorts, only members

and their guests will be able to play on it,

and only property owners, all of whom

probably have several other homes, can

"Our market is going to be the UK,

Ireland, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Germany. In the light of the pandemic,

us isn't going to be developed at all."

There will 300 units and pricing is

punchy. "We'll be selling lots from \$2.5

million to \$10 million," Meldman says.

a great clubhouse and a village with restaurants, spas, wellness gyms, kids'

walk straight on to the beach, where

homes on and off a Discovery Land

potential buyers is second to none.

"We may do a hotel later on. It's going to be a very amenitised community with

clubs, pools and a lake. The members can

there'll be a beach club and surf school." What's the price differential for similar

resort? "Our pricing is typically between three and five times higher," says

Meldman, whose database of well-heeled

Any other sites in Europe? "It's hard because we need a big piece of property

with entitlements (legal approvals to

The year 2020 has been good to

to protect me for 20 years." He's also armed with a positive attitude: "We cater

to the child in all of us. Life should be

fun." We can all raise a margarita to that.

opportunistic in Europe than strategic." So, if another property came up, would

Meldman, and he isn't personally worried

about the virus. He even claims: "I've had

it and my doctor tells me I have the T cells

develop]. You need to be more

he look at it? "Absolutely."

it's the perfect property. The area around

a reported \$1 billion in 2017. Call it the

the brand that he and good friends

would surely not approve.

Meldman Touch.

become members.

because of my kids. I wanted golf to be fun

ranges play loud rock'n'roll, while golfers

put coolers on every tee full of Cokes,



**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

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

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

**5 La Zagaleta** This private two-course country club 13 miles inland from Marbella has villas from £2.7 million up to £27 million; lazagaleta.com

> **Terre Blanche** A private two-course estate in Provence with a fivestar hotel and fewer than 100 houses; villas cost from £4.5 million to £9 million; terreblanche.com

Hudson Valley, 100 miles north of New York City, Discovery Land's newest resort has condos, townhouses and plots from £1.5 million;

beachfront resort in two private million; kiawah

Anahita Some 240

island.com

St George's Hill **Golf Club, Surrey;** a villa in Terre Blanche, **Provence**; beachfront mansions on Kiawah Island, **South Carolina** 

Silo Ridge In

discoverylandco.com Kiawah Island A

> South Carolina with five public courses. private enclave of mansions that cost from £3.8 million to £11.6

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



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." members don't golf, so for families staying example, we'll plan their whole trip – fly What about the children? "We're wilderness, zip lining, whatever. You just

> 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

Spas, wellness centres and fine "They've got frozen margaritas, a dozen