

LIKE THE HIGH-HANDICAPPER who's trying to hit a long drive into an ocean wind, the biggest challenge facing a reviewer of the Martha's Vineyard golf scene is to show some restraint, to just put a nice, smooth swing on it, and avoid the natural tendency to sound like a cheerleader.

That just got a lot harder with the recent opening of the Vineyard Golf Club, an ultra-exclusive, organically maintained course designed by the world renowned Donald Steel (who also did Carnegie Abbey in Rhode Island, and is the only architect to work on St. Andrews since Harry Colt in 1913).

As for the 100-square-mile Vineyard itself, it has long been regarded as a safe harbor for the quietly famous, and a world-class magnet for the sailing set. But golf enthusiasts have had three strong courses to choose from as well – the Edgartown Golf Club (1926), a private nine-holer with privileges for residents, the famous Farm Neck GC (1976) and the nine-hole Mink Meadows GC (1936), both daily fee courses with memberships.

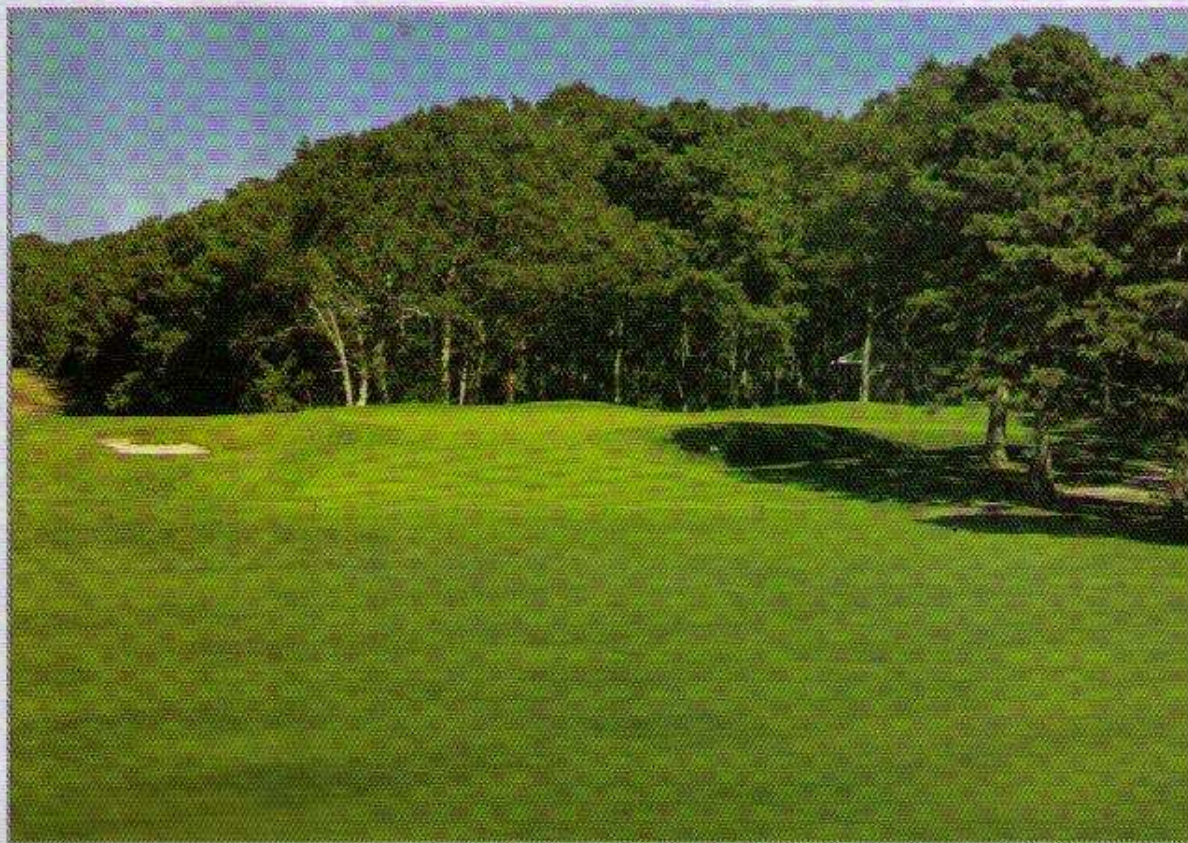
The new addition catapults Martha's Vineyard, with its 54 holes, onto a level occupied by neighboring Nantucket, with its 72. Taken together, it's crazy how much good golf these little islands have, an embarrassment of riches if there ever was.

Before boarding the ferry at Woods Hole for the 45-minute voyage, we should stop here to consider for a moment how the islands relate to the region as a whole, the 50 courses that fall inside the geographic triangle between Sankaty Head on Nantucket, Kittansett in Marion, and Highland Links in Truro, including Oyster Harbors and Hyannisport, New

Martha Vineyard

SERVES UP A
FOUR-COURSE FEAST

BY JEFF BLANCHARD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE PEEBLES



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Toss in some of the newer clubs, such as Cape Cod National in Brewster, the Bay Club in Mattapoisett and Crosswinds in Plymouth, and add the cherry on top, which seems to be the destiny of Olde Sandwich — Ben Crenshaw's soon-to-open super-private beauty just up the road from the dynamic Nicklaus-Jones duo at Pinehills — and BANG, you're in the middle of a sprawling golfer's paradise, never too far from your own little slice of heaven.

To some, Martha's Vineyard may seem out of the way, but it's really only a short flight or ferry and about three good shots from a state of splendid isolation. Enough lovebirds have decided it's the place for their nuptials to make the Vineyard No. 2 behind only Las Vegas in terms of wedding business in America.

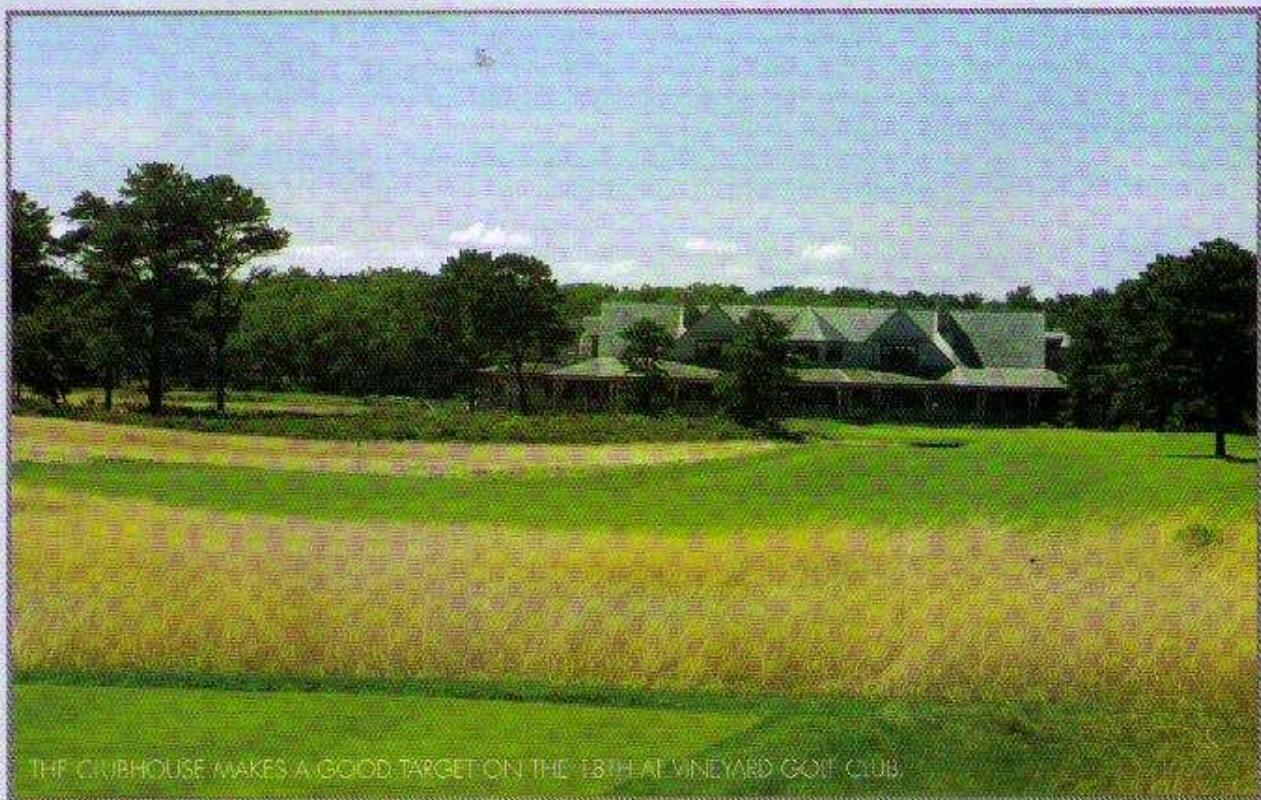
It is easy to see why. The Vineyard is a living postcard of a classic New England fishing port, where the people are hospitable in the manner of a remote population and practically everything is pleasing to the eye, beginning with

the Cape Cod shoreline on the other side of the Vineyard Sound, a panorama that begins with the rolling hills of the Elizabeth Islands, flows east to the bustling town of Hyannis with its ferries and lights and buildings that appear to float on the horizon, and continues on with the better-looking harbors and gardens of Cape Cod.

Having managed to get our car on the ferry, we immediately set off along the two-lane road between the dock and the Island Inn, our Oak Bluffs base camp for this 36-hour excursion. The drive would take us past the harbor and through the village of gingerbread houses (where the retreat has become an attraction), over the friendly local police officer for directions, and finally to the right road to Farm Neck, which actually abuts the mainland but takes 15 minutes to reach by car.

If all goes well, we will play every hole on the course before the Steamship Authority's last run tomorrow will require many accommodations from our hosts ("Thank You!") and the kind of professional dedication that goes into writing about golf for a living.

Hello, ball.



THE CLUBHOUSE MAKES A GOOD TARGET ON THE 13TH AT VINEYARD GOLF CLUB.

VINEYARD
GOLF CLUB
EDGARTOWN
508-627-8930

When the Vineyard Golf Club opened a couple of years ago, the fanfare came with two refrains – it was designed by Donald Steel, who had recently completed the much-ballyhooed Carnegie Abbey in Portsmouth, R.I., a \$40 million playground for the golf and polo crowd, and it was the first course around to use no harmful chemicals on its turf (a condition of the approval from local authorities, who were not of a mind to welcome a new source of water pollution).

Both can be seen as feathers in the cap of the club's developers, a triumvirate of successful businessmen from around the country, but neither fact should overshadow the larger truth: the Vineyard comes as close to the ideal of a perfect golf club as there is, anywhere, and immediately must rank at or near the top of the heap in New England, despite its tender age.

Armed with solid backing and blessed with a pristine forest in the middle of what feels like nowhere, Steel enlisted his partner and fellow Scotsman Tom Mackenzie in the

effort, and the result is a truly special place – less a series of 18 holes than a single story with 18 subplots.

A student of the masters who has lately been considered one of them, Steel literally wrote the book on links course design. His treasure here is inland from the saltwater, and so the merits of the design are accentuated by the fact that there is nothing else for the eye to see, just the course, surrounded by trees and a quintessential Vineyard thicket of gnarly scrub. You could walk the entire property and detect nothing of the outside world except the skies above, although on some days the roar of the surf must carry to the clubhouse.

In a pure coincidence, this is the second Steel course for head professional Gene Mulak, who held the same position during the opening of Carnegie Abbey, built by the eccentric, non-golfing golf developer Peter deSavery.

Mulak favors the challenge and opportunity of the new to the humdrum of employment at some of the older clubs he has worked, which could seem "like Groundhog Day compared to this," he said.

In the case of the Vineyard, it's part start-up and part science, being one of the few organic golf courses in America, as opposed to Sweden, where the chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides used to grow and maintain green grass have been banned completely.

So, how do they do it at the Vineyard Golf Club? Technology, both high and low.

For one thing, they use turkey manure. They also work hand-in-glove with agronomists from the USGA and

Cornell University to plant the right seed for the soil and conditions. It costs more to operate because of the labor involved, but the results are indistinguishable from the pro-chemistry set.

You can stand on any one of the big, hard, fast, smooth rolling greens and look back to a fine-hewn apron – the links approach – and then to the gently curved flow of the line where green fairway meets ominously dark green rough, well defined from tee to green. Towering fescue serves as a golden parachute for the wayward, short, long and wild, and the maples, oaks and pines that survived the clearing of the course are usually there for a reason, but they act more as individuals than a gang.

From the first to the last, the course plays as if it were hosting a big tournament later in the week (something like a Walker Cup would be about right), with everything just so, the look and consistency of the greens-keeping, the iced buckets full of cold drinks, the big, sturdy flagsticks, no tread marks anywhere – as 95 percent of the players walk. (On that day there were caddies tending to each of the three or four groups on the course, keeping the balls in sight and the play moving along. “That’s Golf Ball over there,” Mulak told of a caddie on the next fairway. “He used to be with ‘Tom Lehman.’”)

From the opening drive to the final putt, the player can concentrate on golf and nothing but, as that’s all there is,

just golf, nothing else. If you see some open grass wounds around the pushed up edges of the deep-faced bunkers, that’s where the crows have been pecking grubs from the soil, Mulak explained. That’s about the only telltale sign of the course’s eco-friendliness, that and the break in the flow between 7 and 8, where a “frost bottom pond” has earned designation as a protected habitat for a certain moth, and thus as a lateral water hazard that is circumnavigated by a shuttle service for walking golfers.

Speaking of walking, the other local custom that guests will notice is their shoes are taken and cleaned before every round in order to remove the stuff from other courses.

“It’s like one big Petri dish,” said the affable Mulak, who is as good a golfer as he is a tour guide, and better than most at both. As we prepared for the round on the patio outside the brand new clubhouse, an architectural masterwork itself, strong and handsome yet nothing pretentious, we chatted briefly about the club’s short history, from the laborious permitting process to the club today.

“We might have the most spread out membership in New England,” with golfers flying in to play from 34 states and nine countries, he said, including some familiar names from Wall Street to Hollywood. “That’s got to be the funnest thing about working here, a great membership.”

A Chatham native, the 38-year old Mulak has settled in with his family at the only residence on the property (not



VINEYARD GOLF CLUB'S FIRST HOLE

counting the rooms in the clubhouse), one of only three structures visible from the course. If the place ever gets busy, it's in August, when nearly half of the club's 6,800 rounds-per-year are played.

"I like to think I have the best job in the section," Mulak said. "I feel very blessed."

He decided on the club pro route after a promising playing career that just wasn't promising enough for him to attempt the grind. He tells the story of playing in a qualifier for an amateur national championship alongside a young Justin Leonard. They both shot 76, which pleased Mulak to no end, but did nothing to satisfy the eventual Ryder Cup hero and PGA star. "We were walking off the 18th green, and he turned to me and said, 'Too bad we didn't have our A games out there today.'"

Pause. "If that wasn't a sign that I ought to be giving clinics somewhere..."

Oh well. Nowadays the PGA comes to him, in a manner of speaking. When Scott McCarron was looking to play a tune-up before last year's British Open, he went to the Vineyard CC and slapped it around with Mulak.

Even Mulak's Taylor-Made prototypes have some PGA in them; they were built for fellow lefty Mike Weir, who decided he'd hold off putting them in his bag until after the Masters, which he won, which is how they ended up in

Mulak's bag instead.

Not that he needs any help. Whatever it was that kept him off the tour, part of it had to be a lifestyle choice. The guy can hit a ball 300 yards down the middle in a 25 mile-per-hour wind while having his picture taken and chatting with his caddie. He could play with Bam-Bam's club.

Time after time he was left with putts from 50-50 distance, usually for birdie. He would ask our caddie, Junior, "Do you see an edge, Junior?"

Sometimes the caddie didn't need to say a thing, as Mulak would see the line himself and assume the responsibility, but Junior was always right when it mattered.

Reading putts was one of his many skills. A native Jamaican and 4 handicap himself, Junior knew within a few strokes who could do what with which clubs out there, and he always seemed to station himself in the right section of the knee-high grass to find my drives without getting hit by them.

As a veteran caddie, he not only relieved the physical burdens involved with 18 holes of golf, but also the nervous system, as he consistently chose just the right words to encourage a good shot or to flatter the not-so-good with silver linings. "We'll find that," for example, or, "That's all you wanted."

While Junior was focused on keeping us all moving



THE VINEYARD GOLF CLUB'S TALL FESCUE AND DEEP BUNKERS MAKE FOR A BIG CHALLENGE

forward, Mulak was enjoying himself, for both his good play and his guests, and he took special pleasure in being able to point out a course feature that had just come into play. That's how it happened at "The Pit of Doom." Mulak's name for a particularly penal bunker that wasn't noticed until it was too late, thus ending a long drive down the right side down a barely visible manhole that stole probably 50 yards. Ouch! One of us had to look away to avoid losing it and appearing the bad host.

Hole after hole, the Vineyard offers golfers a chance to reach for the stars, and if they hit it, great, and if not, a chance to try again, from a sheer-faced bunker or a field of fescue, from thick, heavy rough or a nice clean lie in front.

Every hole is different in its demands, with regular rewards for length and accuracy, and there is a premium on the soft approach, preferably below the hole for protection against the three-putt, as holding the ball on a try from above was only possible when the cup got involved, or not very often for the non-professionals among us.

(Incidentally, Clinton played here, too, and mentioned to one of the members at the turn that he was having a lousy day putting, but he still carded a front side 39, which was a surprise to some of the eyewitnesses.)

Putting and prevarications aside, playing the Vineyard is a Zen-like experience, where the golfer is at one with the surroundings, just you and the ball and the unimaginably

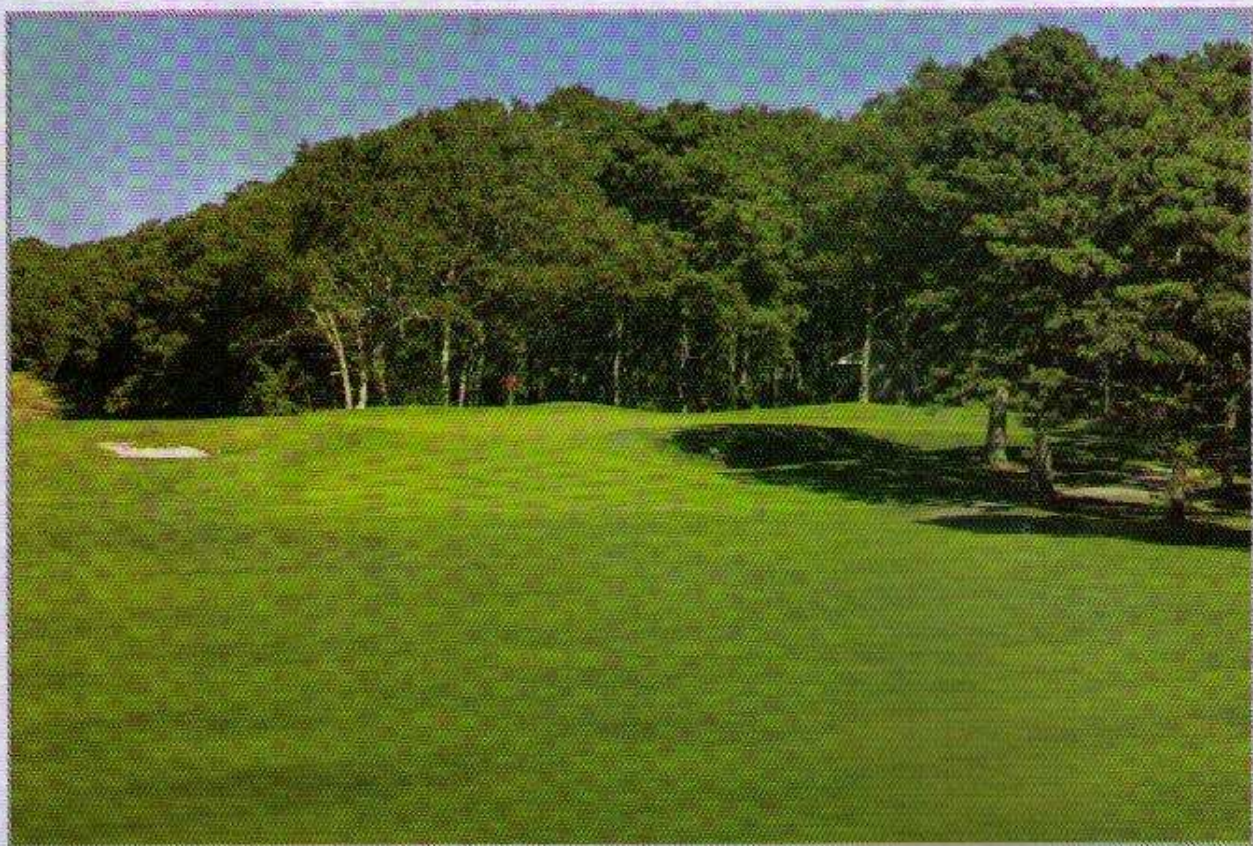
well-groomed turf.

At 7,044 from the championship black tees, with a slope rating of 142 from there, it is big enough to handle today's long hitters, but at 6,643 from the blues, 6,211 from the whites and 5,399 from the reds, it can also be a manageable length for the rest of us.

Par 72, the course is balanced with two par 3's and two par 5's on each side. The longest par 3 is No. 8, at 218 yards from the blues, with the frost bottom pond to the right, a jungle left, thick rough short and bunkers on the sides of that faraway green. The longest par 5 from the way back is the 583-yard No. 3, where a lot depends on the wind direction and your own ability to hit the ball on the screws at least twice in a row.

More than anything else, Steel strives to create a course that can be played by hacker and whacker alike, providing challenges but not tricks, forcing long-ball hitters to play with control, or else, and giving short hitters enough room to maneuver without having to make too many do-or-die carries. Most of the landing areas are friendly and visible, and all but one of the greens may be approached through the front door.

In light of the environmental considerations that went into its development, the Vineyard GC can be seen as a proto-type for the club of the future, and it is destined to rank among the very best as a course design.



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DONALD STEEL

A noted rugby and cricket player on the international stage, Donald MacLennan Arklay Steel took up design after many years of competitive golf and while carrying on a long career as a writer.

He was president of both the British Institute of Golf Architects and The Association of Golf Writers, was golf correspondent of *The Sunday Telegraph* from 1961-90, and author of *The Classic Links of Great Britain and Ireland*, among many other titles he wrote, edited or co-wrote, including *The World Atlas of Golf*.

Steel's firm has built 50 courses in 20 countries. The first in the US was Cherokee Plantation in South Carolina, followed by Carnegie Abbey, whose owner also commissioned Steel for the Carnegie Links at Skibo Castle in Scotland. Steel courses were featured four times in a recent 18-month period on the European Tour, for championships in the UK, Spain, Italy and Sweden. Along with St. Andrews, Steel worked on renovations at No. 2 at Royal County Down, the Arran course at Turnberry and some 400 others around the world.

His firm is guided by a philosophy that favors the natural look and strives to appeal to golfers of all levels.

"A preference for the natural, traditional look has always guided the work of our company. Classical golf values underpin our faith. Golf course architecture obeys no rules. Architects have a free hand. Courses come in all shapes and sizes, bound neither by dimensional restrictions nor standardized fashion. Good architecture relies on the virtues that cannot be taught – intuitive thought, imagination, an eye for land and knowledge of the game.

"However, there are a few rules of thumb that most accept as the fount of inspiration. They form

the gospel of links golf that extols the virtues of improvisation, invention and ingenuity in shot making. It also believes that the golf course should be part of its surroundings, blending as imperceptibly as possible with the landscape. Only as a last resort should the landscape be transformed to accommodate the golf course. Good courses protect the environment. Bad designs disfigure it.

"A good course should make the best use of the terrain, wending its way through varied features and routed so as to provide balance in its make-up. It highlights the importance of the proper angling, shaping and contouring of greens – the centerpiece of every hole on every course. Clever variations of level add to the interest and appearance.

"Golf course architecture is a creative endeavor. It should be the art of the possible. Making courses impossible is easy. Spectacular holes undoubtedly lift any course but enjoyment is the watchword and golfers find little enjoyment in losing balls attempting long carries over water or in knee high rough. Too much modern architecture is the slave to contour, irrigation, power and the lob wedge. It conforms to a sterile formula that is a betrayal of the belief that there should be more than one way of approaching any shot. Freedom of choice in shot making is one of the joys of the game, not least around greens.

"Here, green keeping policies play a vital role in a course's presentation, but climate and terrain dictate the type of course and hence the way it plays. Modern golf course architecture's greatest achievement is in building courses in places and countries where, hitherto, it would have been out of the question. They are breathtaking feats of engineering, but they are expensive. A golf course architect's main responsibility is to make the very best of the land he is given within the budget available."