



# POLE

*WHOEVER SAID YOU SHOULDN'T BUILD*

# STAR

*ON SAND CLEARLY WAS NOT A GOLFER.*

Poland's first appearance in our Top 100 Golf Courses: Continental Europe ranking, Sand Valley delivers a vivid, intense and strategic test of golf. Duncan Lennard reports.





Ask Sand Valley's architect Tony Ristola to show you his palms and you will see a landscape not unlike the surface of the moon. He is particularly proud of three prominent calluses on his right hand. Nicknamed Mt Everest, K2 and Zugspitz, they make Ben Hogan's famously worn Modern Fundamentals hands look like Kiera Knightley's.

Ristola is a rare breed; an architect who believes in doing the donkey work himself. Traditionally, a golf architect walks on to a site, delivers a vision and a routing, then disappears while a construction team does its level best to dig it into the land. "I think it's a process that leads to disappointment with the end result," Ristola argues. "It's like Donald Ross said, 'Design on land, not on paper'. Sure I'll make drawings, sketches, just thinking about what I'm going to do. But then I'll go out and start pushing dirt around. It's the best way, because things occur to you as you're shaping.

"All those massive green contours at Sand Valley? Well, you can blame them on me."

More of those later. Sand Valley is a fascinating example of what happens when an architect takes a hands-on approach. A visual treat and strategic joy, this is a course of boundless energy, innovative angles and infinite variety. Every part gives the impression that it has received someone's personal attention. Ristola is even responsible for the charming, old-style ragged shaping of the course's defining sandy waste areas, hand-edging each one with a spray can and shovel. In all, he spent a total of 452 days on site, working an average of 11 hours a day and completing Sand Valley in 2009.

Built on the sand belt that defines this part of northern Poland and across into Germany, some 40 miles south-east of the northern coastal town of Gdansk, it is often touted as an inland links. Ristola himself isn't so sure. "Honestly, I cannot tell you what type of golf course Sand Valley is," he shrugs. "She has multiple personalities.

"There are holes through forest, in open rolling spaces, along the river, paralleling the railway line, holes with wetlands, with ravines, along ledges, in an abandoned quarry, and through river dunes."

Within a decade, this wild ride has established itself as Poland's best course, and the country's sole representative in Golf World's Top 100 Golf Courses: Continental Europe. If Poland might not be an obvious choice for the travelling golfer, Sand Valley is helping to make it an inspired one.



Epic greens complexes are one of Sand Valley's most defining characteristics.

### Creative force

The title of Poland's best course, it has to be said, is not as grand as it sounds. A country of just 5,000 or so registered golfers in a population of 38 million, the place has been relatively slow to shrug off its golfless Eastern Bloc past. It possesses just 26 18-hole courses, as well as a few nine-holers. "When I arrived here 12 years ago there were 4,000 golfers," informs Sand Valley owner and CEO Antti Pojonen. "So while there is some little growth, we have not had this big boom yet. We have high hopes for Adrian Meronk, who is the first Polish golfer to reach the Challenge Tour. This country follows when they have someone to relate to. If Meronk could make it on to the European Tour, it could be the catalyst for the growth we are all waiting for."

The country's lack of golfing pedigree did, however, cause problems during the genesis of Sand Valley, a process that began in 2006. "When the idea first came to me to build a golf course here in the early 2000s, I decided that I wanted it to represent 'real' golf, not that parkland, white-sand American bullsh\*t," says Finnish investor Kai Hulkkonen. "I wanted to take Sand Valley 100 years back to the courses of Alister MacKenzie's day, not over-designed or over-maintained. As we now see with the

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success of minimalist design, and proponents like Gil Hanse and the Crenshaw/Coore partnership, this type of course has become sought-after."

The owners brought in Finnish architect Lassi Pekka Tilander, the man behind Estonia's excellent Parnu Bay, to lay out the course. However, the Polish construction company brought in to build it quickly ran into difficulties. "The hard thing about creating a golf course in this part of the world is that there is no golfing fraternity to draw on," says Sand Valley's consultant agronomist Bruce Jamieson. "There are very few qualified greenkeepers or golf course builders, and that has, at times, hindered the progress of Sand Valley." "Basically, the team we brought in didn't have the ability to build the course," adds Pojonen. "Work ground to a halt. This is when we found Tony Ristola."

A former tournament player and coach, Ristola had designed some minor courses around his base in Germany. But his hands-on philosophy, and his belief that the architect should remain on site to supervise and even participate in building the course, was exactly what Sand Valley's owners needed to hear. Ristola kept Tilander's routing, but changed



just about everything else. A keen student of historical golf architecture, Ristola agreed with Hulkonnen's vision for a fast, running course at Sand Valley that would allow an old-fashioned ground game. "It suits the wide open and free-draining nature of the site," he asserts. "Also, after being there for a month, I realised there is no dominant wind direction in this part of the world – perhaps because it is affected by both maritime weather patterns from the coast 50 miles to the north, and Continental patterns from the south. This created the need for flexibility with the design, and helped crystallise a vision for extremely wide fairways, with randomly-positioned bunkers just as often in the middle of them as

The crowned greens reward good ball-striking and a versatile short game.

## “I wanted Sand Valley to represent ‘real’ golf, not that parkland, white sand American bullshit.”

down the flanks. I wanted to use the MacKenzie tactic of putting traps where people wanted to hit to create a strategic test. That is what Sand Valley has become.”

### Ace of space

Though northern Poland is unlikely to be on the radar of most travelling UK golfers, it is no less accessible than the hotspots of Spain and Portugal. Eleven UK airports offer direct flights of around two-and-a-half hours. A 45-minute drive south-east down the new S7 Expressway and you will find yourself at Sand Valley's gates. As you turn in, the row of luxurious Scandinavian-style white-walled villas, complete with swimming pools, gardens

and barbecue areas, reminds you Sand Valley is also ranked inside the top 50 of Golf World's Top 100 European golf resorts.

Though the tee of the 365-yard par-4 first hole is a healthy 5-iron from the clubhouse – a hotel is planned for the space between – it offers one of the most appetising openers a golfer can find. While the OB tight to the right offers the first but by no means last echo of the Old Course, the fairway unfurls fulsomely downhill to the left across engagingly rolling terrain. While the safe left line makes for a tougher approach, getting one away off the first will rarely be so painlessly accomplished. In a gentle taste of what is to come, the expansive and contoured green is accessible via flight or bounce, but deviously falls away at the back. Happily, though, the green surrounds are both generous and neatly clipped, allowing a wide range of recovery shots.

“The greens here are in fact two, three, even four times larger than they appear because you can putt from off the green,” adds Ristola. “The average guy can pull whatever their favourite shot is and scuttle the ball up on the green. This helps the course's playability. Even though the contours are pretty intense, the average guy can get down in three. However, you'll find you'll need an expert short game to get the ball up-and-down on a regular basis.”

While the themes of width off the tee, open green fronts and clipped aprons repeat throughout the round, it doesn't take long for Ristola's multiple personalities to become apparent. While the 1st could almost be British parkland, the par-4 2nd introduces you to the gorgeous, wriggly-edged sandy waste areas, created by stripping off the topsoil, that do more than anything to give the course its character. With pine and silver birch flanking the fairway, you could momentarily be in Pine Valley. Just 130 yards long, the par-3 3rd is a heavenly pitch to a devilish plateau green, hitched up a couple of yards ■

### SIGNATURE HOLE

## THE 12TH PAR 5, 544 YARDS

Architects don't like talking about signature holes, because it suggests they tried harder on one than the other 17. Tony Ristola is no different. Ask him for Sand Valley's signature hole and he reels off a list of five or six of them. He does, though, concede that the par-5 12th is somewhat different

than the rest. “There is a reason this hole feels different,” he admits. “It's where we dug all the sand from to build up the low-lying areas on the 6th and 7th. We excavated an area 250m long, 70m wide and 3m deep; you can see the walls of the excavation right and left.” But rather like the famous island 17th at



Sawgrass, a simple need to excavate sand has inadvertently created something special. Almost below ground level, the hole has something of a stadium feel. Skirting waste areas to the left then the right, this snaking par 5 permits driver off the tee to a split fairway, but miss it and your best option is a lay-up bulge some

180 yards from the green. Nail your tee shot and you can reach a wider zone before the green with your second, but there is more sand to be avoided and a typically unwelcoming green, angled left-to-right across you. Another memorable hole, it adds drama and variety to the playing experience.

from its surrounds with reed beds to the left. The par-5 4th changes pace again, swinging you out into the open landscape, with more waste area guarding the water hazard around which the fairway boomerangs. Asking you to wind up your power game one minute, then demanding infinite finesse and precision the next, these four holes provide an exhilarating and bewildering start. “The strategy and the wide open spaces make it hard to know what you’re doing first time,” smiles Pojonen. “The first round can sometimes feel like a slap in the face. But once you get the hang of it, you are hooked.”

While it’s hard to find anything not to like about Sand Valley, the solid par 4 6th hole gives you the first real taste of its one true Marmite area – the aggressive green contours. While the delicious front shelf on the 3rd and the hogsback nature of the 5th will give you some hairy moments depending on pin position, the 6th green delivers an uncomfortably narrow and perched pin position at the back, with dramatic fallaways either side. For a hole measuring 460 yards off the back tees it seems extravagantly tough. The vast green can offer several less penal pin positions, but there are times when your score feels rather at the mercy of the side of the bed from which the greenkeeper emerged that morning. While the elevated 9th green is beautifully sited, the next truly memorable moment comes at the tee of the downhill par-3 10th. With a green, again slightly raised, cut into the sand, it is both a visual and strategic treat. This is, though, the prelude for what for many is the highlight of



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the round, the par 5 12th (see panel) that snakes between waste areas, and seemingly below the level of the surrounding land, giving the hole a stadium feel.

Hot on its heels, the short par-4 13th is another fascinating hole. Here Ristola uses a sharp ridge, created by an ancient river path, to split the fairway into upper right/lower left levels. The ridge ends abruptly at a created green site which falls off the back and left. Adding intrigue to an otherwise routine hole, this is a strong example of the intensity of Ristola’s design.

Through the back nine the course continues its heady mix of wide fairways, striking waste areas and tumultuous greens. But it is the 16th, the fourth of four bunkerless short par 4s, that perhaps provides the course’s most controversial moment – a green, angled rather like the Road Hole at St Andrews minus the bunker, with a raised and awkwardly-angled section at the back. “It’s elevated and tough to hit,” says Ristola. “The front of the green rejects your shot, so your pitch needs precision. Easy bogey, challenging par.”

### Sand art

With an old-style philosophy, shaggy-edged, unkempt waste areas and only 40 created bunkers, Sand Valley was always going to look more natural than manicured. This, coupled with an inexperienced greenstaff, could raise question marks about its conditioning. “I’d say

The bunkering is as much about making a visual statement as it is presenting a hazard.

there are times, perhaps towards the end of the year, where the grass can get a bit long, the greens a bit slow,” says Bruce Jamieson. “But throughout the season it compares favourably to anywhere. It has the potential to be as good as any golf course.”

Jamieson was brought into the fold last summer after the course’s irrigation system failed during one of the country’s worst droughts. Though the course shuts for three months from December to February, it can reach into the 40s Celsius here during a hot summer. His importance to the course’s presentation was underscored by his decision to cut Sand Valley’s fairway fertiliser budget by 80 percent. “The grasses here are bents and fescues,” he informs. “These grasses need to be kept lean and hungry. But it was being overfed. It creates thatch build-up and encourages botanical change.” Jamieson is also working with the course manager on improving soil aeration, controlling any outbreaks of disease and cutting regimens to encourage the growth of natural flora. The course was also struggling with some ugly scarring created by buggies. Originally intended as a walking and caddying resort, Sand Valley now has a fleet of 50 carts. It’s a problem Ristola helped solve by widening the waste areas to incorporate buggy paths. “It’s actually made the course better, more dramatic,” he argues.

With these measures in place, the golf course appears to have got over these recent conditioning hiccups. There

is certainly nothing lacking in the polished jade swathes of the fittingly dramatic 18th green – fully 80 yards long, and climbing about 10 from front to back. It is a visual statement and shows how Ristola, a one-time commercial artist, has applied his aesthetic eye into Sand Valley. Bunker edging, green contouring, even the shaped crests of the bunkers, every area shows a nod to visual impact. More relevant to the playing experience are his “camouflaged” tees – as low as possible unless, like the 5th, they can be screened by trees. “I felt a series of ‘pop-up’ tees, three or four feet off the ground, would be an eyesore,” he says. “So they are as low as possible to fit in with the natural terrain.”

And here, perhaps, the major triumph of Sand Valley. A new-build on sandy soil, it would have been so easy to try to chase an out-and-out inland links, with revetted pot bunkers and manufactured dunes. Instead, owners and architect took a good, long look at what the land was offering – an expansive, almost lunar sand-based landscape on two plateaux, with some trees and water – and capitalised on it. It’s resulted in an authentic and unusual test of golf, characterised by immense variety and colour.

Sand Valley is not an inland links. Only the sandy soil, the grass types and the ground game they afford paint it as such. A better description would be a heathland course without heather. Better still would be to avoid characterising it at all. Playable, versatile and fun, it simply offers a rollicking good game of golf for a wide range of abilities – and that’s not far off the definition of a great course. **GW**

## HOW WE RANKED SAND VALLEY

