



J.P.

Trailblazing

Magazine

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December 2019



**KEP MERLI
PROJECT**

TOURISM

HOSPITALITY

BUSINESS

DIPLOMACY

CULTURE

C O N T E N T S



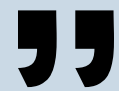
Editor's NOTE

When I look back at 50 years of work in Hotels, Resorts and Multi-use Facilities, I am fortunate to belong to an Academy of High Executives within the Hospitality and being awarded the highest prize that ITT Sheraton Hotels Worldwide had even given to an Hotel Executive for Creativity and Innovation.

Today, in my adopted and beloved country, Albania, I keep working in and for the Hospitality industry as freelancer or consultant and now I'm so proud to launch the first magazine, the online **TRAILBLAZING** Magazine by **JPHospitality**. I want to dedicate this edition to the person that made me look at Albania as a land of opportunities in Tourism like he did a few years ago, my mentor, Mr. Gazmend Haxhia.

The **Trailblazing Magazine** will be offering in and out of Albania news, personal and professional reviews, on site National and International interviews and much more. The writer and partner Rudina Hoxha and I will be providing you with the best literature, case studies and "out of the blue" news.

Thank you,
Jose Pinto



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NEW RESORT

KEP MERLI OFFERS PLEASURE SERIOUSLY!

Mandi Shenediela sat down with Trailblazing HOSPITALITY to reveal all about “Kep Merli Resort and Residences” and why this resort has it all...

Could you tell us more about Kep Merli Eco Resort and Residences, its development and to whom are you targeting?

The project “Kep Merli Resort and Residences” is located in Saranda, Albania. Directly located at the Ionian Sea, the development site comprises two peninsulas on 280,000 m² of land in total. The total construction area constitutes to 80,000 m².

With merely 2 km of linear distance to the island of Corfu, the development is ideally situated amidst nature, featuring several beaches and sparkling blue water on one of the most beautiful coastal stretches of Albania’s southern coast. With the UNESCO World Heritage site “Butrint”, the city of Saranda as well as the islands of Ksamil close by, the surrounding area of Kep Merli clearly has a lot to offer.

The Northern Peninsula includes a 5*star hotel with 210 rooms, suits, restaurants, bars, conference rooms, a spa & wellness centre, a yacht marina as well as 16 marine and 4 luxury villas, for sale, with private infinity swimming pools and colourful garden spaces each.

The marine villas have already been constructed, while the respective interior work is currently ongoing. The marine villas TYPE A span over 240 m² internal space with an uncovered area of 900 m², 116 m² balcony and veranda space as well as a pool area of 35 m² each. The TYPE B villas feature 220 m² of internal space with an uncovered area of 900 m², 112 m² balcony and veranda space as well as a pool area of 35 m² likewise TYPE A each. This part of the project is almost completed. The construction site for the 5 star hotel is prepared.

The Southern Peninsula includes a 4* hotel with 250 rooms, suits, bars, restaurants, conference rooms, an amphitheater, a spa & wellness centre, two yacht marinas as well as 40 Mediterranean villas with private swimming pools and colorful garden spaces. This part of the project will be constructed in a joint - venture between Boiken Developments and Edil AI. Both companies present in the real estate developments market for more than 20 years each.

The Kep Merli Residential Collection reflects a modern architectural design, balancing high construction quality and open floorplans with the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Besides lots of natural light, big windows guarantee amazing sea views from every room in the respective houses. In addition to that, all residents can take advantage of concierge and security services 24/7 as well as have full access to the hotel facilities and leisure facilities offered once they are constructed in 2022.

Kep Merli Village will ensure that everything necessary for a permanent residency at the resort is right at hand, including a pharmacy, a grocery store, a dry-cleaner, a spa and wellness centre, a florist as well as banking services.

The Kep Merli Sports Club will allow both guests as well as residents to enjoy sailing ,watersports, tennis and basketball courts as well as a diving centre, which is designed for both beginners and more experienced divers.



How is Kep Merli doing so far? What is development path plan, and when are the different Stages of the project being finished including the services?

The Marine Residential Collection is close to completion by Summer 2019 marking the end of **Phase 1** of the project. The sales process has started with successful foreign investors already inhabiting the villas.

Model homes fully furnished are already available for future clients to experience first hand the quality provided within the Resorts space.

Phase 2– Foresees the completion of the Five Star Hotel within summer 2022.

Phase 3 and 4– As previously mentioned find themselves in a joint venture between Boiken Developments and Edil – AI expecting to complete the Mediterranean Villas, the Apartment Blocks and the Family Hotel within Summer 2022.

How different is this resort among some others that are mushrooming on the Area? Is there a specific strategy for Kep Merli?

The strategy is simple – take pleasure seriously – which means offer a space of the highest quality in terms of smart design and construction details as well as developing the property referring to 5 star international management guidelines.

WHAT MAKES KEP MERLI?

1. Concept Development
2. Evaluation and selection of appropriate location
3. Development of ideal utilisation concepts
4. Project development and efficiency optimisation of planning
5. Project realisation
6. Support by hotel experts consultancy at each stage



What is your invitation to the foreign prospect buyers to visit Kep Merli and get in love with it?

Albania's virginal natural beauty and encouraging economic and political climate have allowed the small country to arise as an attractive European tourist destination. Memberships in international organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, EBRD, IBRD, NATO and WTO have largely propelled economic activity. Particularly, tourism has served as a major growth vehicle, helping boost investments in many other sectors. In the past 10 years the Albanian governments have concentrated on establishing a favorable business climate through the simplification of licensing requirements and tax codes. The country boasts low barriers for new market entrants in various industries, whereas the young and well-educated labor force is one of the most price-competitive in Europe.

In 2014 Albania gained the much-awaited EU candidate status, which is expected to lead to an EU membership in the near future.

"Albania, once an inaccessible backwater, is open for business. Buy now" says the Telegraph's Christopher Middleton.

In recent years the country has experienced a remarkable inflow of both foreign and domestic investment. Particularly since the approval of Albania's EU Candidate status in June 2014, its coast has seen a continuous increase in property values. Such values have maintained positive growth rates even throughout the recent recession, and show promise of even higher levels in the near future.

In spite of the fact that prices are generally quite below the median of other similar European coastal locations, notable sales growth has been reported by local agents, with some premium beaches along the Riviera reaching West-European levels.

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

The architectural intent during the resort's conception was to try and blend all the dwellings into the landscape, respecting the original form of the peninsulas' topography. With this principle in mind, the building terraces were designed to follow the hills' curves with minimal architectonic and visual impact.

REAL ESTATE AND SALES

The simplicity and elegance of design and ease of use are a great advantage of Kep Merli, allowing the residential collection to position itself in a newly-emerging market niche in Albania, that of luxury living and leisure. Boiken Developments has consulted international partners, adapting the resort's design, luxury standards, pricing and sales strategy to appeal to both domestic and international markets.

TOURISM/ HOTEL MANAGEMENT

Considering the project's magnitude and its potential to drive international demand to the area, while serving as a vehicle to propel tourism growth throughout the country, Kep Merli is classified as a project of national importance. A project that will be managed, marketed and operated under an International Hotel Management Brand whose 4* and 5* resorts across the world are a symbol of luxury and quality. The venture is expected to generate considerable local wealth and employment.

CONSTRUCTION AND ENGINEERING

A low construction density of 12% has guaranteed a minimal impact on the landscape. All of the constructed buildings have only one storey protruding above ground level allowing for a minimal visual impact at the time of completion. At these minimal heights (about 2m above ground) all residences and hotels could be easily hidden behind the extensive amount of planted trees throughout the Kep Merli's project construction lifetime. Special attention has been paid to the technology and systems which allow the structures to perform efficiently over the years with low maintenance costs, waste and carbon emissions.

Looking into the horizon in terms of hospitality trends, what do you think of them and what are you looking for?

Presently there are no adequate holiday resorts in Albania. The majority of Albania's holiday hotels have up to 50 rooms and are primarily directed at Albanian tourists from Albania and outside. However recently the Southern Coast of the country has been experiencing the first waves of adventurous tourist residing in the existing hotel modules which will start to demand services comparable to the latest European hotel trends such as spa treatments, sports types(golf principally) of holidays .



For this reason, all superior resorts in the Mediterranean (such as One and Only, Aman, Conrad W resorts etc in comparable micro site locations and based on a comparable concept (superior international) standard hotels in exclusive locations directly on the sea) can be principally considered as competitors and trend setters to follow.

In the near future we assume the fulfilment of the following conditions in a National scale so that the Tourism eco system nurtures the existing attempts and more 5star International Standards structures and services in the near future to take place. As Nation in unison we should satisfy at least partially the below mentioned conditions in order to attract a certain demographic of tourists that is requiring similar comparable services as the ones found in International standard Resorts in the north west region of the Balkans and EUROPE by extension :

- **Operation of the Hotels and Resorts under a well-known brand with appropriate international sales and marketing organization**
- **Professional management**
- **Professional marketing via travel operators and connection to high-performance international reservation system, professional internet marketing**

- **Easy access for international travelers via Multiple National Airport.**
- **Adequate local demand for weekend trips also in low season**
- **Professional marketing (Improvement of the National Marketing Strategy) of the region and Albania as a whole with the aim of sustainably improving the country's image**
- **Creation of quality tourist infrastructure**

Being an Eco Resort, and having taken into the project the minimum impact to native nature and flora, fauna etc, are you marketing that as such?

The impact the structure has on the land scape its part of a destructive process which then later allows for a new form of life to take place. The kind of living with humans in it. We are seen from the flora's and fauna's perspective as invaders and marketing it as a Eco Friendly Resort would be hypocritical.

That's why the term changed from Kep Merli Eco Resort to being Marketed as Kep Merli Resort and Residences. It makes us sleep at night with a slightly clearer conscience.

RADISSON HOTEL GROUP

Radisson's David Jenkins: Keen to Build a Strong Basis in Tirana



“Our initial goal is to find a project in Tirana – to build a strong base in the country then to look for resort opportunities. There are still limited ideal projects and we hope that by attending events such as this one in Vienna that we can find new opportunities. We will certainly keep looking for the right project and are keen to come,”
David Jenkins, Vice President Business Development at Radisson Hotel Group, told Trailblazing Magazine.

Radisson Hotel Group is an American multi-national hospitality group. The company started as a division of Carlson Companies, which owned Radisson Hotels, Country Inns & Suites and other brands. Radisson Hotel Group is one of the world's largest and most dynamic hotel groups with seven distinctive hotel brands with more than 1,100 hotels in destinations around the world. The portfolio of hotel brands includes: Radisson Collection, Radisson Blu, Radisson, Radisson RED, Park Plaza, Park Inn by Radisson and Country Inn & Suites by Radisson.

Asked about the 8 brands of the Radisson Group, Jenkins said that “certainly for a resort in Albania we would consider our upscale Radisson brand and the upper upscale Radisson Blu brand – again depending on the specifics of the project” while he considered Conversion opportunities in the country. “For Albania there have been many excellent reports in the European press recently about the beauty of the coast and great opportunities present to create stunning new resorts and boost the economy through tourism – we remain positive on this,” he concluded.

Radisson is present in the Balkans, say, in Serbia. Why not yet in Albania? When do you think Radisson will be coming to our country given the fact that many developers and investors have started to receive the licenses from the Albanian government to start their projects?

Yes we have been present in the Balkans for some time now and see good growth opportunities across the region. With Albania of course we have looked at some projects in the capital – Tirana – and along the wonderful coastal areas. Our initial goal is to find a project in Tirana – to build a strong base in the country then to look for resort opportunities. There are still limited ideal projects and we hope that by attending events such as this one in Vienna that we can find new opportunities. We will certainly keep looking for the right project and are keen to come.



Which of the 8 brands of your company are more suitable for Albania given the recent project of Albania / 100 villages or our wonderful coast?

It is hard to define the answer because of course every project is different, every investor has a different budget and every location is unique – but certainly for a resort we would consider our upscale Radisson brand and the upper upscale Radisson Blu brand – again depending on the specifics of the project.

Would Radisson take any existing non-branded hotels and invest, transform and bring it up to your standards to be operated by you?

Yes, we are always on the lookout for what we call 'conversion' opportunities – either to manage or offer a franchise. It is a clear and successful way for owners to enter our network and to improve performance through exposure to new demand segments and our professional management



How do you see the future of tourism and hospitality in the Balkans in general and in Albania in particular?

In the Balkans in general it is very positive – both for the traditional coastal areas and the main cities. People are looking always for new destinations – for sometimes less expensive locations and to find new experiences. As for Albania there have been many excellent reports in the European press recently about the beauty of the coast and great opportunities present to create stunning new resorts and boost the economy through tourism – we remain positive on this.

Do you have any Albanians part of your staff in the European Division? if not, do you plan to recruit any?

With several hundreds of hotels in EMEA I am sure we must have but is not information I possess!

HOTCO's Success Is a Direct Affirmation of These Regions' Potential

What makes HOTCO 2020 a subject of such a great interest and attention? HOTCO has been able to build up a brand since its beginning four years ago, as it has focused on the entire CEE, SEE and CIS region since day one. The objective of HOTCO was to help contribute to investment activity in the hotel industry in this region. As hotel consultants based in Budapest for thirty years, we have foreseen a strong development pipeline and eventually deals and transactions. Our predictions of four years ago are materializing as hotel transactions are up 100% since then in CEE.

With all the speakers of such a caliber, what are your expectations? We are very proud to have been able to attract world class speakers to provide insights to what is the direction of the global hotel industry and help interpret their relevance to the stakeholders in the region. Our speakers have unrivalled expertise which is much valued by our audience, many of whom are first time hotel developers. The speakers are inspirational leaders, so we know that our participants are using HOTCO as a source of motivation and reconfirmation for their own goals for the start of the new year.

What can HOTCO offer in particular for Albania and SEE in general? Despite the fact that the regions HOTCO covers - SEE, CEE and CIS - are very diverse, they have a lot of similarities. When it comes to hotel developments, some are more advanced than others, hence what we have seen in the CEE is now being experienced in SEE, with serious uplift in hotel values expected over the next 5 to 10 years.

There are other platforms in the world, similar to HOTCO intending to stimulate debate on hotel investments. What differs HOTCO from the rest? At HOTCO we are always experimenting with different formats for discussions and debates and we listen to our participants. People come to such events to be able to share ideas and find new business opportunities, accordingly, we focus on providing 7 hours of networking. We are always very humbled when



Marius Gomola, MRICS, Founder of HOTCO, a leading hotel investment conference for CEE and the Caucasus, shares with Trailblazing Magazine the latest about HOTCO 2020, due on January 20-21, 2020.

Gomola, also the managing director of Horwath HTL Hungary, the oldest hotel, tourism and leisure industry advisory in CEE and a hotel consultant for 30 years, explains this event from A to Z.

we hear that CEOs of big companies actually implement the knowledge they have gained at HOTCO, which shows us that there is always something to learn and that HOTCO touches on the right topics.



How has HOTCO evolved throughout the years, from its initial idea to date? We have always insisted on having the best speakers from four continents, to be able to give the audience a glimpse of the future on a global scale, but we always help the audience interpret what these trends mean on a local level. In that sense, HOTCO hasn't changed much but we can see great changes in attendees' as well as speakers' attitudes. Whilst it was initially difficult to bring certain companies to HOTCO (Western hotel groups or investment funds, for example) because they did not feel the region was relevant to them, we have seen a total turn around since then, with many more international companies eager to join. We like to hope that HOTCO is contributing to development in this region and we certainly feel that HOTCO's success is a direct affirmation of these regions' potential.



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TOURISM

PICKS

Spain

The new signings of Radisson in Spain are aligned with the group's wider ambition to open 20 hotels in Spain over the next three years – as guided by its five-year operating plan to become one of the top three hotel companies in the world.

RADISSON RED MADRID

This new Radisson RED hotel features around 200 rooms and will open its doors in 2021 in the center of Madrid. It will become the Radisson RED brand's new flagship property in Europe, with an unprecedented emphasis on technology – featuring an automatic no-queue check-in and app-based service personalization among other developments. Its ground-breaking, youthful urban design and stunning public areas will help to turn it into a meeting point for the city's creative and artistic community.

RADISSON COLLECTION HOTEL, GRAN VIA BILBAO

Boasting a premium location along the prestigious Gran Vía Diego López de Aro, the Radisson Collection Hotel, Gran Vía Bilbao will bring a new level of hospitality to this beautiful Basque city. The opening is planned for Q1 2021 and the hotel will feature 137 stylish rooms, including 20 junior suites and 1 suite. Leisure facilities will include a rooftop restaurant, bar and terrace – with one of the best views of the city – as well as a lobby bar, gym and spa.

RADISSON COLLECTION HOTEL, MAGDALENA PLAZA SEVILLE

Located in the historic center of Seville, one of the most beautiful and touristic cities of Spain, the hotel will open its doors in Q2 2020. The Radisson Collection Hotel, Magdalena Plaza Seville will have 89 bedrooms across two buildings – as well as exciting new facilities that will include a rooftop swimming pool, terrace with lounge bar, solarium, gym and spa. The restaurant will feature fine gastronomy, with a menu dedicated to local cuisine.

▶ ITALY

During 2019, Radisson Hotel Group has announced a number of signings in Italy – bringing new properties to key destinations like Milan and Rome, while introducing two new Radisson Collection hotels.

RADISSON COLLECTION HOTEL, PALAZZO TOURING CLUB MILAN

Set in the headquarters of the oldest and most prestigious Italian touristic organization, the Touring Club Italiano (TCI), this new Radisson Collection hotel is perfectly situated in the heart of Milan. Due to open in 2020, the Radisson Collection Hotel, Palazzo Touring Club Milan will feature 93 stunning guest rooms and suites, a restaurant and garden bar – as well as a 140sqm meeting room and wellness center and a bookshop.

RADISSON COLLECTION HOTEL, SANTA SOFIA MILAN

The second Radisson Collection property to arrive in Milan, this transformation project will create a destination hotel for both high-end cosmopolitan and business clientele. It will have 160 guest rooms, including 43 junior suites and 11 suites, while leisure and dining facilities will include a fine gastronomy restaurant and a rooftop bar with views over Milan. The hotel, which will also offer hi-tech meeting and events spaces for the local and international business communities.



RADISSON BLU GHR HOTEL, ROME

Set to arrive in Italy's most popular tourist destination, the Radisson Blu GHR Hotel, Rome will provide guests with a unique opportunity to experience the best of the Eternal City's historical, cultural and sporting attractions. Due to be fully renovated by Q1 2021, Radisson Blu GHR Hotel, Rome will feature 297 rooms, including 41 junior suites and 10 suites. Guests will have the chance to enjoy a wide range of delicious dishes and locally inspired drinks at the hotel's restaurant & bar – as well as taking in views of the Eternal City from another rooftop restaurant.

(Courtesy: Hotel News Resources)

Portugal

Alongside its existing Radisson Blu property in Lisbon, Radisson Hotel Group is diversifying its portfolio on the Iberian Peninsula with two new Radisson RED properties:

RADISSON RED LISBON OLAIAS

Set to open in 2021, the new-build Radisson RED Lisbon Olaias will arrive in the vibrant Olaias neighborhood of Portugal's capital, with excellent transport connections to the city center. It will be the group's second property in Lisbon, alongside the Radisson Blu Hotel, Lisbon, and adds to the Radisson RED brand's presence across the Iberian Peninsula. Featuring 290 rooms, a OUIBar + KTCHN, a gym and a rooftop pool.

RADISSON RED PORTO

The Radisson RED brand is also set to arrive in Porto, Portugal's second city – and due to open in 2021. Boasting a prime location in the Nova de Gaia area, the Radisson RED Porto will be within walking distance of some of the city's top attractions – including the iconic Dom Luis I Bridge – and will add 278 rooms to the group's Portuguese portfolio.



Global Hotel Construction Pipeline Reaches New Record Highs

• By Lodging Econometrics

Lodging Econometrics (LE) recently compiled construction pipeline counts for every country and market around the world. Their analysts state that the total global construction pipeline ascended to a record high of 14,051 projects/2,327,923 rooms, a 9% increase in projects and an 8% increase in rooms year-over-year (YOY). The report summarizes development in 176 countries worldwide.

With the exception of Latin America, all regions of the globe either continued to set record high pipeline counts or have already settled into topping-out formations amidst concerns of a worldwide economic slowdown. The fallout after the on-going trade dispute between the United States and China continues to be the leading contributor.

But, low-interest rates and accommodative lending terms are the primary catalysts behind pipeline growth as the global pipeline should continue to grow for the foreseeable future, albeit at a much slower pace.

There is a record high 6,565 projects currently under construction worldwide having 1,192,398 rooms. Projects scheduled to start construction in the next 12 months; peaking at an all-time high for both projects and rooms, stands at 4,392 projects/636,080 rooms. Projects in the early planning stage continue to grow, with a 6% increase in projects and 10% increase in rooms, YOY, standing at 3,094 and 499,445 respectively.

The top countries by project count are the United States with 5,653 projects/693,207 rooms, just 230 projects shy of its all-time high of 5,883 projects set in the second quarter of 2008, and China with a current pipeline of 2,991 projects/592,884 rooms, which is a new high. The U.S. accounts for 40% of projects in the total global construction pipeline while China has 21%, resulting in 61% of all global projects being concentrated in just these two countries. Distantly following are Indonesia with 378 projects/63,196 rooms, Germany with 320 projects/57,689 rooms, and the United Kingdom with 280 projects/40,970 rooms.

Around the world, the cities with the largest pipelines by project counts are Dubai with 173 projects/50,832 rooms, New York City with 166 projects/28,231 rooms, and Dallas, TX with 162 projects/19,972 rooms. Los Angeles, CA follows with 158 projects/25,428 rooms, and Houston, TX with 146 projects/14,998 rooms.

Leading brands in the pipeline for each of these companies are IHG's Holiday Inn Express with 737 projects/93,415 rooms, Hampton by Hilton with 689 projects/90,634 rooms, Marriott's Fairfield Inn with 397 projects/43,451 rooms, and AccorHotel's Ibis Brands with 387 projects/54,683 rooms.



The first half of 2019 saw a total of 1,374 new hotels/196,237 rooms open around the world with an additional 1,675 hotels/236,334 rooms scheduled to open by year-end. With the global pipeline being at an all-time high, LE forecasts that new hotel openings will continue to climb with 3,168 hotels expected to open in 2020. In 2021, new openings are forecast to reach 3,171 hotels. Should all hotels forecast to open by 2021 come to fruition, it will be the largest surge of new hotel openings, collectively around the world, that LE has ever recorded.

(Courtesy: Hospitality Trends)

The Best Countries in the World to Visit Now

From European classics that crop up on the list of the best countries in the world again and again – Italy, Portugal, Croatia – to further-flung places that keep drawing travellers in – Vietnam, Colombia, Tanzania – these are the best countries in the world according to the readers of Condé Nast Traveller. The scores below are percentages representing overall average levels of satisfaction.

Here are the winning countries as voted for by the readers of Condé Nast Traveller in The Readers' Choice Awards 2019:

01. INDONESIA. SCORE 92.78
02. THAILAND. SCORE 92.37
03. PORTUGAL. SCORE 91.94
04. SRI LANKA. SCORE 91.79
05. SOUTH AFRICA. SCORE 91.59
06. PERU. SCORE 91.28
07. GREECE. SCORE 91.18
08. PHILIPPINES. SCORE 90.63
09. ITALY. SCORE 90.62
10. VIETNAM. SCORE 90.46
11. TURKEY. SCORE 90.15
12. JAPAN. SCORE 89.74
13. MEXICO. SCORE 89.70
14. TANZANIA. SCORE 89.70
15. ISRAEL. SCORE 89.54
16. COLOMBIA. SCORE 89.41
17. NEW ZEALAND. SCORE 89.11
18. IRELAND. SCORE 89.08
19. CAMBODIA. SCORE 89.03
20. CROATIA. SCORE 88.83

(COURTESY: CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER)



THE BEST AIRPORTS IN THE WORLD 2019

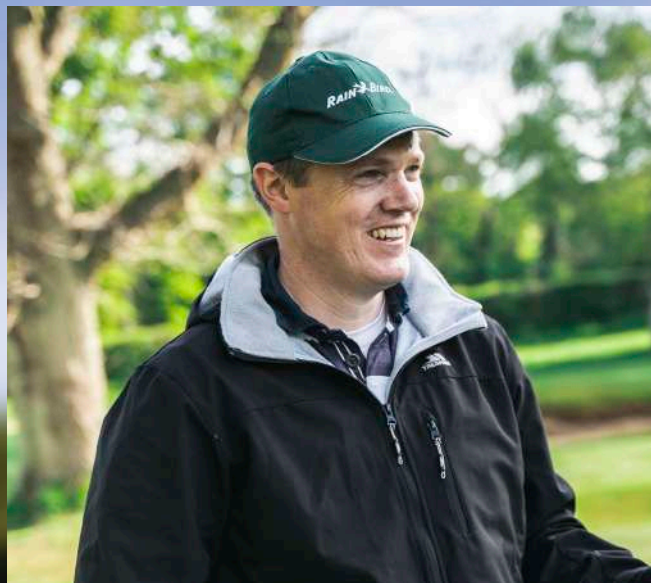


In this year's Readers' Choice Awards, we asked more than 600,000 readers for their intel on the very best airports to fly into and out of across the world. Here how they voted for the best airports in Asia, Europe, the USA and the Middle East:

Here are the winning airports in full:

01. Singapore (SIN), 94.74
02. Indianapolis (IND), Indiana, USA, 93.22
03. Doha (DOH), Qatar, 91.45
04. Seoul Incheon (ICN), South Korea, 91.30
05. Dubai (DXB), UAE, 91.25
06. Hong Kong (HKG), 90.16
07. Savannah Hilton Head (SAV), Georgia, USA, 90.11
08. Zurich (ZRH), Switzerland, 89.46
09. Portland (PDX), Oregon, USA, 89.18
10. Copenhagen (CPH), Denmark, 88.76

(COURTESY: CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER)



** Stephen Ridgway is Director – Ridgway Golf Design Ltd
www.ridgwaygolfdesign.co.uk*

“Golf for Albania,,



Are we ready for it?



Old Course (Golf course in St Andrews, Scotland)
W Sands Rd, St Andrews KY16 9XL, United Kingdom



Hundreds of miles of sandy beaches, a fantastic Mediterranean climate and many natural and cultural wonders. The tourism potential in Albania is huge. But outside of the immediate region, the country has an image problem and an under-developed infrastructure which is putting off potential visitors from the more developed parts of Europe. This in turn, deters foreign investment into the country. So how can the country turn this around and could golf be the answer? It's not difficult to see why developers and hotel chains turn to golf to attract the higher-end tourist market. A golf course can lengthen a destination's tourist season by attracting golfers wishing to play when it is too cold for them to do so in their own country. The average golf tourist spends significantly more than a non-golfing tourist and will often be a repeat visitor. Golf courses are catalysts for other infrastructure, such as hotels and real estate and these attract other related services, boosting local and regional employment. Over the last 20 years, traditionally non-golfing countries such as Vietnam, Dubai and Mexico have all benefitted greatly from the introduction of golf tourism. Within the Mediterranean, Turkey's Belek resorts have made a

contribution to the country's tourism revenues by extending the tourist season. But there are also problems with introducing golf into a country with no golfing heritage. Golf is seen all over the world as an expensive, elitist sport and whilst this may be seen positively as a status symbol by some, it is often this which gives golf a bad image and inhibits the game's development in a country. Then there's the perceived detrimental impact to the environment and questionable use of natural resources. But golf has a lot more to offer than just 18 holes of manicured grassland. Through careful and creative planning and decision making under the guidance of an experienced golf course architect, golf courses can deliver huge benefits to their local communities, the environment and the economy. The foreword taken from a publication by the Golf Environment Organisation (GEO) entitled 'Sustainable Golf – Development Guidelines' https://sustainable.golf/assets/0004/7963/GEO_Dev_Guide_Web.pdf states: 'Golf has great potential to positively contribute towards sustainable development across emerging and established markets. We are seeing more and more new and existing golf

facilities developing innovative solutions to new problems right across the globe. These facilities are generating benefits for their social and natural environments whilst providing 'multiuse recreational facilities for all generations. 'Golf has great potential to positively contribute towards sustainable development across emerging and established markets. We are seeing more and more new and existing golf facilities developing innovative solutions to new problems right across the globe. These facilities are generating benefits for their social and natural environments whilst providing multiuse recreational facilities for all generations.' Facilities like this typify the sentiment that golf can be more than a game... they can be new recreational facilities for golf, walking, cycling and socialising. Golf facilities everywhere, of all shapes and sizes, are used as meeting spaces for local community groups and councils, school groups, evening socials, coffee clubs, local markets and more. They also play a role in conserving local habitats, cleaning rivers and streams, housing bats, birds and amphibians, connecting green corridors and linking up wider pedestrian networks.' 'This work is being done now and often goes unnoticed.'

Community Benefits

Golf has a positive social, health and welfare benefit to both golfers and its surrounding community:

- Encourages all age participation
- Adapted for all skill levels
- Promotes face to face interaction
- Reduces stress
- Improves fitness
- Promotes good life skills such as sportsmanship, respect, integrity, honesty and self-control
- Facilities can be used for community gatherings, weddings and as a meeting place



Environmental Benefits

Some of the ways in which a well-conceived, designed and constructed golf course can benefit the local and regional environment are:

- Protects, enhances and creates new wildlife habitats for native flora and fauna species
- Improves biodiversity
- Creates wildlife corridors
- Flooding and erosion control
- Water treatment, storage and re-use
- Cooling effect for surrounding property
- Filters dust, pollen and noise pollution
- Creates and manages beautiful, integrated landscapes
- Educates locals and visitors about the benefits of protecting their environment
- Can be developed on degraded, derelict or poor-quality land



An aerial photograph of a coastal resort area. In the foreground, there's a sandy beach with waves crashing against the shore. Behind the beach is a large resort complex with numerous buildings, swimming pools, and lush greenery. In the background, a golf course with several holes and water features is visible, extending towards a town or city on a hillside. The sky is clear and blue.

Economic Benefits

-A successful golf club can add value to the local and regional economy by:

- Creating employment – directly and indirectly
- Generating taxes – directly and indirectly
- Promoting charitable fundraising
- Generating year-round tourism
- Attracting higher spending tourists
- Attracting other forms of tourism such as cultural, business, sports, health and MICE
- Increasing property prices
- Attracting new businesses to the area
- Providing an additional amenity for nearby hotels



ALBANIA



So how could Albania use **GOLF** to boost **TOURISM** and benefit the local community if no one is willing to invest?

One option could be for the Albanian government to develop a golf course themselves. By doing this, the government would send out a message to nervous investors that they are committed to improving their tourism offering as well as giving them a focus for their investments, whether that be hotels, real estate or other sporting activities including additional golf courses.

To further improve it's sustainability, the course should be open to the public as well as tourists. This would generate interest for a game where there currently is very little and give a sense of ownership to the community in which it is situated. Tourists would be charged a premium rate to play which they can afford whereas registered locals could play for a much-reduced fee such as is in operation at the 'home of golf' St. Andrews (Scotland) where the university students and town residents pay a much lower annual or daily fee to play any of the seven golf courses than visitors do.

And golf courses don't have to be particularly expensive to build. The land is the expensive bit, but if that belongs to the government then that's the biggest

hurdle already overcome. With the right parcel of land in the right location and the right golf course architect, a quality 18 hole golf course could be constructed for as little as 2 million Euros plus the cost of a clubhouse and maintenance facility. It could even be developed in phases of 9 holes, particularly if there was a residential element included in it.

Typically, a full 18 hole golf course without housing on relatively flat land requires a minimum area of 50 hectares although ideally you'd want more than this to allow for a good buffer between holes for wildlife corridors etc. A site with steeper terrain or with surrounding infrastructure such as major roads or housing will require significantly more than this. Consideration should also be given to including practice facilities such as driving ranges, chipping zones or a golf academy.

Designing a golf course within a real estate development is trickier because as well as making the best use of land for the golf course, you are also trying to maximise views from the housing on to the golf course to increase a plot's

desirability and value. This will mean at least doubling the land requirement compared to a standalone golf course. But as long as you the land is available, the eventual returns from sales will far exceed the cost to construct the golf course.

Golf has so much to offer so many people. Whether you are a golfer, a non-golfer, looking for work, a developer or a politician, there's something for everyone regardless of age, gender or class. So come on Albania, give it a go and reap the rewards!

** Stephen Ridgway is Director – Ridgway Golf Design Ltd
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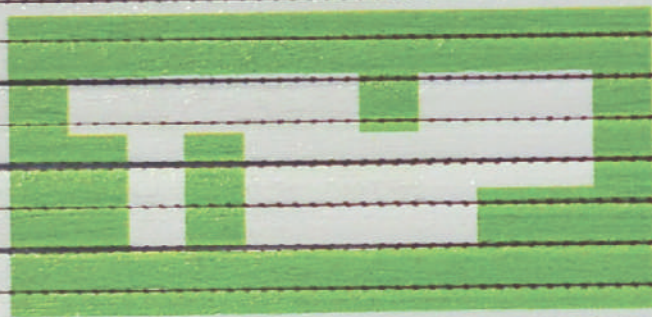
Stephen is a golf course designer and member of the European Institute of Golf Course Architects (EIGCA). He has been involved in the design or renovation of more than 50 courses around the world and heads his own design firm based in the UK.



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