

## The Ouagadougou Golf Course – *more than just a golf course*

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The Ouagadougou golf course (OGC) is like no other that we have been to, seen or read about. Its history alone is worth a story. After playing on the OGC for a year, I gradually observed several tendencies that now allow me to also state that the OGC is more than just a golf course. By its surrounding, i.e., in the middle of a fast-growing city, the poverty, cultural pressures, and lack of public facilities goes beyond being ecological. It has become an open-air reading space, a local medicine botanical garden, a meeting place, a refuge, and runner's heaven among others. Let's begin at the beginning

**History.** The course was created in 1975, on the land of the local Chiefdom of the Mossi tribe, at the encouragement of some, mostly French, expatriates. The land was bare exposing slates of rock, its upper surface having already been scrapped off and taken to level out the city's airport which was then under construction. The local Chief leases the land to the OGC.

**Environmental status:** On the environmental front, the OGC is much like the original concept of the Scottish courses, with their insightful guiding principle of 'not changing the environment'. That alone is welcomed. On the OGC land, there is literally no grass, so like other courses in dry areas, it did not 'grass it.' Players can play their ball right off the stony, on occasion sandy surface, or, as most do, carry around a small mat to hit off from the fairway. Thus, the Ouagadougou course is very ecological. It is so by default. Since there is no grass, there is no need for pesticides, fertilizers, or irrigated. Its only non-ecological act is that of mixing some used engine oil with sand. This mix is used to cover the "greens." The oil helps protect the sand from flying away in the wind. While viewed as not ecological by some, this oil-sand mix is done sparingly only once a year and the "greens" are rather small.

This ecological status can be attributed to two reasons. One, it is located in the part of Burkina Faso, West Africa, a mostly very dry and hot country, where water is precious. Considering that on average, some USA courses, need about 180,000 liters per year on a golf course, it is simply out of the question here. So, the fairways are essentially a collage of spots of fine tiny stones and large streaks of red rocks, in places bulldozed to be level. As a golfer can quickly imagine, playing on the OGC course is not the same as playing on lush green fairways and real greens. But it does the job.

In a rich country, these limitations could be overcome, as they do in parts of the United States – in the dry lands of Arizona, New Mexico, California - and courses in some desert countries around the Mediterranean, but Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world, so here it is not yet feasible. Also, economically, the local golf market isn't big enough. The foreigners that make up the largest part of the club's membership do not suffice to allow for any major investments.

As more media attention around the world is being focused on how golf courses are not environmentally friendly, several golf courses in the rich world are adapting through inventive and pragmatic ways such as less grass surfaces, less wasteful irrigation, heat resistant plants, alternative energy sources, recycled water, the OGC might not need to do anything different after all!

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<sup>1</sup> A retired American in Ouagadougou - 01-2018 to 08-2020

An issue of attitude. While ecological, the course does present somewhat of a challenge to players used to playing on lovely, lush green courses or even sandy ones. The idea of playing on a hard pan and rocky fairways can be daunting. A few golfers decline to play on it. But most are sportive types and chose to make the best of it and play. It does not take long for them to get used to the surface and begin having fun adapting their play. Hitting stingers can gain you tons of distance as the roll factor on this surface is amazing. They learn to enjoy perfecting their high lob shots on to the sandy “browns” or one with a heavy backspin. Such experimentations are fun to do, and don’t hurt in increasing one’s golfing arsenal.

## Employment

Burkina Faso is a very poor country. Employment is terribly scarce. While not its purpose, nor its primary intent, the OGC, by the nature of the sport, is somewhat labor intensive, and so does its part in providing employment. Up to a hundred or so people depend on the OGC for all or part of their livelihood. There are two groups of people employed at the OGC. One is paid by the club directly and the other is paid by the players.

Those paid by the club include ‘**greens’ caddy**. Their specialty is to drag a large rag (a ripped-up gunny bag) over an oil-sand mix once the fly (a group of up to four golf players) is gone to cover up the divots, ball-drop dents, and feet marks, in preparation for the next group. They earn about \$3 to \$5 per weekend. They are not engaged in the weekdays. There is the **ball collector** from the practice range. His job is to pick up balls the range from the practice range. He does this by hand, using a ball-pickup stick. It is taxing work, especially in the hot seasons when the thermometer is showing 40 or 45 degree centigrade. He works seven days per week and gets paid \$5.50 per week. Then there is the **Chief Caddy**. He acts like one of the assistants of the club owner and helps assign caddies to new commers. The latter is a powerful function, because once a caddy is assigned to a new player, he is normally engaged for the duration of the new player’s membership at the club. A player can change a caddy if they wish, but it is act that is frowned upon by all the other caddies. I asked one caddy once, if he would be angry if “his” player would change him. “No, I would not be angry, but I would be very unhappy and disappointed” was his diplomatic response. Then there is the ever-respectful old man that greets you and opens the entry gate to the golf club on weekends. I suspect he gets \$3.50 per weekend. Beyond this steady group, there are several who get temporary employment, for example, churning out the oil-sand mix which they then put on the “greens”, real color is darkish grey sand, or plugging up any erosion caused by the rains. I don’t know how much this group gets paid. It cannot be much, by the look of things, also the task they are engaged to do is seasonal, it occurs only once a year.

Those paid by the players are essentially the **regular caddies** and come off far better than those paid by the club. To play at the OGC, players have to use a human caddy. Its club rules. This rule helps keep 50 to 75 people working. It is a plum job to be taken up as a caddy by a player. Every day, except Monday,



*A golf club curved out of a tree branch.  
Photo: Hartmann 04-2018*

when the club is closed, there would be anywhere from 40 to 60 caddies waiting at the “caddy hut” waiting to be picked up for a game. If a golfer only plays (18 holes) twice a week; the caddy will earn a living wage. These guys might pull in \$10 to \$20 per week. As pitiful as that amount appears to be, it’s a life saver to have such an income in Burkina Faso. With few exceptions, most of these guys have not been to school and know nothing else but golf, having been born near or just around the golf course. The first group of caddies that started when the club opened, learned playing golf with wooden clubs that they cut and shaped from tree branches (see photo).

A handful of the caddies also have side jobs around town as laborers and some succeed to be golf coaches. Among the current crop of caddies are excellent players. Their handy caps range from 10 to zero. Among these, those that have had a chance to go to school and learn French, can moonlight as coaches. It brings in a good supplemental income of about \$7 to \$10 per hour. Sadly, the majority that have not been to school lack the foreign language skills to convey their expertise to potential clients, so they have little chance of being a coach to foreigners who only speak French, with a sprinkle of other foreign languages – English, Japanese, German - speakers. It is rare to find a foreigner that speaks the local languages. On this point it is refreshing to see that the number of locals in the club is growing. This will reduce the language barrier and give more coaching opportunities to these guys.

In addition to the regular caddies, some players engage **'ball' caddies**. Their specialty is to walk ahead, along the sides of the fairway, to better follow a ball's path and find it quicker than would the player and their caddy. Engaging a ball-caddy is not mandatory, but this service is deemed useful by some players.

Most of the golfers at the OGC, hats off to them, do their best to address the economic hardships by simply paying far more than the published cost for the caddies and coaches. Some do even more. On their departure from Burkina Faso, some players leave their golfing equipment to their caddies. The latter can use them or sell them. Often, they keep them and sell single clubs to new commers as needed.

### **The Ouagadougou peculiarities – Golf and Beyond**

The OGC goes beyond being just ecological and a technically interesting golf course. There are many other golf courses around the world that also end up having positive externalities, like being bird sanctuaries. But the OGC, by its surrounding, i.e., smack in the middle of a fast-growing city, the poverty, cultural pressures, and lack of public facilities, appears to provide a whole lot more. It provides a quiet, open-air, reading and meeting space, a botanical garden for herbal medicine, a refuge for a displaced people, and a runner's heaven among others. The following are briefs on each of these extraterritorial activities in and around the OGC.

### **A refuge**

The predominate people in the part of the country where the OGC is located are called Mossi. The Mossi are the largest tripe in Burkina Faso. They are predominantly in the south and south east. But smack in



the middle of the golf course is a village of the Peul people (as referred by Francophones) or Fulani, (as referred by the Anglophones). These are northerners. Their tribe cuts across most of northern West Africa. They are pastoralist. How did a pastoralist northerner come to live in the middle of a golf course in Mossi country? That I do not yet know for a fact, but the story is that in a year of severe drought in the North a small group immigrated south for shelter and ended up on the land that later became a golf course, with their village in it. This Peul village in the middle of the golf course, still has its animals, mostly goats and zebu cattle, which graze what little vegetation they can find around the golf course, but their migratory ways have, out of necessity, disappeared. Still, now and then their camels from the north show up (see painting). The children (3-5-year old) of the village, in addition to their many chores around the village, cleaning and fetching water, make a dime here and there, selling golf balls they recuperate from

the bushes around course. As you stride, determined, toward your ball, you might see two or three little

Peul kids on the side holding out a few balls for sale. They are super cute making it hard to resist buying a ball or two even if you don't need them.

### **The Ougadougou Dance**

On the OGC, a ball landing somewhere on the course, can hit a stone or rock surface and rebound in all directions. Sometimes the ball does what I have come to refer to as the 'Ougadougou dance' i.e., it rebounds left only to hit another stone that makes it rebound right, and maybe left again. Players stand watching the dance, mostly in silence, except for the one that played the ball. They bellow out a few ahhs, and ohhs, and "ahh, no" in French or "ooh, no" in English. A few bellow out other words that are not suitable to repeat here. Balls rebounding back in the direction of the player are also known, as a ball might strike a slightly upwardly angled stone surface and ricochet back in the direction of the player. Losing 30 to 40 meters (35 to 45 yards) in this way or having a beautifully hit ball bounce out of bounds due to these nasty rebounds is so common it is rarely talked about. Of course, not all of the player's cries are negative. Where there are bad rebounds there will also be good ones. Rebounds that bring, an otherwise out of bound ball, back onto the fairway are heaven sent. In this case, the sounds bellowed out are understandably jovial.

Golf, like most sports, has a powerful leveling factor. The OGC is no different. The stones, infuriating or helpful, are extremely fair. Same treatment for all. Company CEOs or presidents, including many heads of military units, super rich citizens, ambassadors, us little guys, and good and bad players, we all get the same treatment. That is a powerful part of golf. You are playing right there with these powerful and important people, and the course reduces all to the same level. I love it.

To protect one's clubs, players play off a portable mat that the caddy carries for you along the course. Playing on a mat, has its advantages. It gives the player a perpetual evenness of tuff surface, as opposed to the unevenness of grass fairways, and allows one to play, with some degree of pleasure, on a mostly hard pan and stone surface, albeit a very ecological course.

Under the shade of trees - A quiet reading, resting and meeting place

All along the golf course there are trees scattered here and there. Most are not big trees, but with wide enough foliage to produce some very precious shade. In a hot country where temperatures in the high forties are not uncommon, such shade is precious. The combed benefit of the shade with the quietness, as found in almost all golf courses, is extra precious. So, it is common to see students, especially before exams, from schools and universities sitting under these trees studying.



If a golfer approaches to hit their ball which has rolled close to a student, they just casually get up, and stand aside. When the ball has been played, they return to their spot to continue their studies. In most cases it is a lone student studying under each tree. It is as though each has found their favorite place and sticks to it.

Another small group that is also attracted to the peace and quiet, come on to the OGC with their scooters, park it under a tree, and stretch out on top of their scooter for a well-earned rest from a tough



and unforgiving world. Still another, maybe for the added attraction of a bit of privacy, are young lovers. They seat or stand below a tree and talk, away from the noisy and nosy eyes of the rest of the city. No hanky-panky here, just talking and laughing, at most holding hands

### **A botanical garden - herbal-medicine**

The trees scattered around the Ouagadougou golf course, apparently also provide more than just shade, calming silence, and beauty. Apparently, a few of the tree species have medicinal value. So, it is common to see a few folks using a very sharp machete or a tiny hoe busy extracting pieces of bark off the trees for use in the medicines they formulate.

The first time I saw this removal of the tree bark, I was saddened, thinking that it would ultimately kill the tree. Trees here, just for the shade they produce, are precious, not to mention their value to the soil and visual beauty. But I was informed that the locals know how to do this without killing the trees. They never cut the bark in a circle around the tree, but extract it in patches here and there, always leaving some top to bottom connection of the bark to allow the tree fluids to flow, albeit, at a reduced rate. For confirmation, I put the question to a plant biologist I know<sup>2</sup>. She confirmed that the way they strip the bark will not kill the tree right away, but it weakens it by reducing fluid flows within the tree. Further, that the cuts also expose the trees to infections. The bark of a tree is a two-way highway of a plant. One highway transports water up to the leaves so they can do their photosynthesis work, and the other transports the nutrients from the leaves down to the roots, so they can do their work. Removing pieces of a tree's bark is synonymous to stripping off pieces of one's veins several times a year, which weakens the person. So, local knowledge notwithstanding, the trees are at risk. They get weaker by the year and the fast-growing population pressure which leads to more and more bark being extracted, greatly reduces their survival rate. The OGC and its workers are aware of the custom and try to discourage bark removal, but to no avail.

### **A runner's heaven**

Burkina Faso, while rich in culture and mineral resources, is still an economically poor country. But, like many other poor and rich countries, there is a small percentage of the population that is well off. They have hard money, live in big mansions, roll around in expensive cars, and dress expensive. The downside of the rich, is their access to abundant food, processed foods and drinks with the total absence of any physical work. So many pay the heavy price of being overweight even at an early age.

A small group of these newly rich, mostly young, that have become health conscious and wish to avoid being overweight, have discovered the OGC, and use it as a running track<sup>3</sup>. They organize runs on the OGC during certain days of the week, where they can run to their heart's delight without worrying about been run over by a car or a scooter (there are millions of scooters running in every which way on the

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Dominique Dumet, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 06-2019

<sup>3</sup> It is rare to find poor kids anywhere that organize to run for the sake of running. Survival does not permit such luxury.

main roads). These runners are cognizant of the primary purpose of the golf course and keep out of the way of the golfers, principally by scheduling their runs on days and hours with minimal golfing activities.

#### **Dark clouds - Too precious:**

The land on which the OGC is located has just become too precious and continues to get more so by the day. The OGC land is located on one of the most desirable spots of the city. It is on high ground, from which one can see a good part of the city. It now also finds itself smack in the middle of the old city (Ouagadougou I) and the fast-growing new city (Ouagadougou II) to which the wealthy are migrating. The pressure of the wealthy to build around such a place is visibly overwhelming. All around the perimeter of the golf course large lots have been sold for the construction of (low density) mega new houses for the super-rich. The construction of these multi-story mansions are pop up like mushrooms. Such construction also comes with the need for more roads, utilities, and drainage. All of which require more land.

The city government has already tried, more than once, to mark-out building lots on the golf course. The land-planning officials would appear unannounced and start surveying off lots, only to have someone from the OGC take them to the local chief, who is also the land owner. A brief meeting with the chief, and the planners back off. How long such pressure can be deferred is the question. The temptation of big money to sell more pieces of the land must be tremendous indeed. But there appears to be some countervailing force, albeit tenuous, against selling. The locals that live in and around the club lands, 'residents' let's call them, see value in having the land kept as a golf course. Apparently, according to a few residents, many of them derive benefits, like work, firewood, medicinal plants, or grazing grounds for their animals, as mentioned above. Thus, on several occasions, when the owner of the land, was tempted to sell pieces of the land as building lots to the wealthy, the story goes, the residents reacted by 'pointing threatening fingers at him', and he backed off. So, the continued existence of the golf course sounds promising, at least for the near future. Looking ahead presents a different scenario. I hope, sincerely, that I am proven wrong.

#### **Looking ahead – too dark to see**

For the long run, seeing the rate of construction all around the golf land, it is hard to foresee the continued existence of the OGC. One possible scenario, for the area, should its existence continue to be threatened by developers, would be to declare it a park. This may not protect the golf course, but at least the other beneficiaries of the land, the 'residents', could continue to benefit from it. In this scenario, the land owner, in addition to some cash payments to cover projected lost revenue, could also be offered some land in a different location. That new land, if well located, i.e., away from the path of the city's expansion, yet still easily accessible, could be used for a golf course if it would generate as much as or more revenue than other possible activities. The combination of a protected park and a reduced golf course is another possible scenario<sup>4</sup>. The worst-case scenario would be to have it simply closed and the land sold to (private or public) developers.

For now, enjoy the OGC. Sharpen your lob shots and spins pitching to the brown-greens, and drive those stinger shots to benefit from the incredible roll. You are playing on one of the most ecological golf courses in the world, which is also much more than just a golf course.

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<sup>4</sup> Have a twelve-hole course, as were the original ones in Scotland, thus liberating a little more land for more specific park needs.