

RESORT OF THE MONTH >

Curlewis Golf Club

■ An aerial view of the 12th and 13th holes. Photos courtesy: Brendan Jam

Michael Davis

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THE DREAM: Curlewis Golf Club owners Lyndsay and David Sharp's multi-million dollar foray into golf almost came about by accident.

As owners of Leura Park Estate vineyard across the road from the club, they had been the official wine partner at Curlewis for years. They stepped up when they heard the iconic course just outside Geelong on the Portarlington Rd was in danger of going under.

"If you're going to have a go, you might as well have a big go," says Ms Sharp, the director of sales, hospitality and marketing at Curlewis.

She clearly has boundless energy, optimism and enthusiasm.

"It is a lot of money. But it is the most exciting thing we have ever done. It is also the most terrifying.

"Having been in this region for a long time, we have a lot of faith in its future. Geelong and the Bellarine (Peninsula) now has a higher visitation rate than the whole of Tasmania. It is the destination of choice now. It's on the map.

"There were all these rumours going around that the club was going under and you could almost see the property sharks circling.

We thought it would be awful if it was going to be turned into 'Legoland,'" Ms Sharp said.

So one Monday morning she randomly wandered across the road to Curlewis from the winery owned by her and her husband. She asked the GM if there was anything they could do to help the club from going under.

It signalled the start of a five-month negotiation to put an offer together. That was seven years ago and the stunning new clubhouse, pro-shop, accommodation and golf course complex officially opened on March 4 this year.

"It's been a lovely, challenging but fun, journey so far. First, we had to gain the trust of the member cohort and build membership. Now what we have done here along with the Range (a state of the art practice facility venue next door), there could no longer be any member who doubts our commitment to this place."

General manager Jamie Bridgen notes proudly that the first event held for 250 members sold out within 24 hours. The "exclusive member reveal" took place in late February. It was a smash hit on all fronts.

The club now has 733 members. Seven-day membership costs \$1800 and there is now a waiting list. The public can play for \$70 on weekdays and \$80 at weekends.

"We had a five-year plan to turn this place around and make it viable," Ms Sharp said.

"Those first years gave us confidence to commit to this most recent \$20 million infrastructure investment but we're now back to square one with a new five year plan."

In Bridgen's four and a half years at the club, female membership has risen from "around 80" to close to 150.

Ms Sharp says women's membership has been a "core focus" since she and David bought the club.

"We set out to make golf fun and accessible for women and to get them involved," she said.

"We've got a women's pathway program, a fantastic junior program and the whole communication behind it is that golf is fun. It's not scary, get amongst it and give golf a chance

– all those positive attributes that I think been lacking in golf for such a long time.

"Golf has always been perceived as stuff you have to wear high pants with white b and yellow V-neck jumpers. These are all 'old pudding' things which are not us. We not your ordinary golf club."

Hence the Curlewis catchcry that golf is Green Fun!"

From the outside, it would appear the S have taken a giant leap of faith buying a g course.

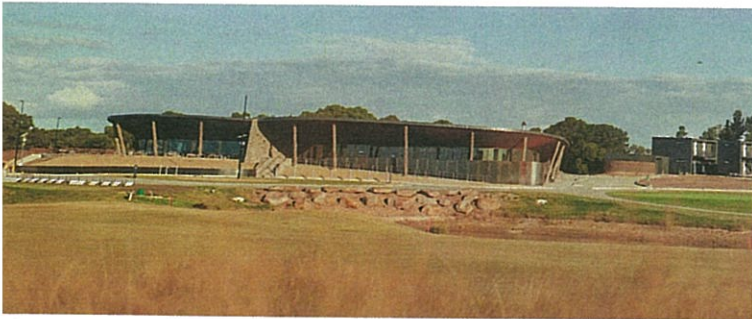
"I play golf very rarely and very badly. But I loved everything else about golf – membership, marketing, hospitality offeri Ms Sharp said. "I'm all things front of hou the experiences and marketing. David (an accountant by background) is across what some would say are the more seriou components like finance and administrati We complement one and other's strengths

THE COURSE: With a sandy base, very f trees and naturally undulating couch fairi the Vern Morcom-designed links course i of the best on the Bellarine Peninsula.

It first opened in 1970 and the original c was enhanced in 1976 by a Kevin Hartley course master plan.

In 2001, significant improvements were again made following the adoption of a se master plan by renowned course architect Michael Clayton. With challenging bunke and firm, fast greens, it is the wind that of determines the level of playing difficulty a Curlewis.





The course is a par 71 challenge for players of all standards and a true test of golfing ability. Golfers can enjoy this walk or cart course along with the beautiful vistas across Corio Bay.

Signature holes abound. Bearing in mind that the nines were 'flipped' when the new clubhouse opened, the new 12th is regarded as a beautiful hole.

It is a 302 metre par-4 with out of bounds all the way down the left-hand side.

Clayton says the hole would not look out of place in Scotland and believes it is one of the best short par-4s in Australia.

Players also rave about the short par-3 eighth - a lovely natural amphitheatre with a three-tier green. It is a stunning looking hole as you stand on the tee.

Brigden says Curlewis is always beautifully presented.

"It's fun to play. And whatever standard of golfer you are, you can play it. It's not one of those courses that will beat you up. It's just nice to be out there and play. It's not too penal and the fairways are an absolute delight.

"It was about making the course as good as we could possibly make it," Brigden explains.

"We were not chasing ratings or anything like that. We wanted to use the natural land and try to be sustainable while we were doing it," he added.

Examples of this include the re-invigorating the natural wetlands on the fifth and sixth holes and the wastelands added along the right-hand sides of the first and third holes.

"They add to the aesthetic of the course and make it a lot better visually," Brigden says.

THE ACCOMMODATION: "We had always said 'over my dead body' to the thought of accommodation but over recent years it's become increasingly obvious to David and me that it was a 'no brainer,'" Ms Sharp said.

"There's a desperate need for accommodation in the region and it was a logical progression for Curlewis. It also made sense from a destination golf club perspective.

"We wanted the accommodation to embrace the surrounding landscape. The rooms are designed to be welcoming, contemporary and comfortable -- 'luxe' but not pretentious," she says.

Curlewis has 60 suites and sleeps 126.

Suites include Signature, Premium Fairway View, Premium Bay View, 'Eagle' (sleeps 3) and two Accessible suites. All rooms feature floor to ceiling windows, private balcony, premium Sealy beds, luxurious custom made Curlewis robes, limited edition Eleanor Millard prints, private bathroom, a floating bench, squab couch and Marimekko cushions.



What Ms Sharp refers to as "extra mile" components include sustainable Australian made Orana Collection amenities and complimentary canned water which is volcanically filtered and Victorian. The rooms also feature an iron, ironing board, full length mirror and a safety deposit box. The Julius Meinl coffee is great and the Tea Drop Tea selection is from an Australian company.

THE CLUBHOUSE: The clubhouse is contemporary, elegant and innovative. It may just be the best clubhouse in the country especially when you consider the facilities, its ability to host functions and the eating experiences on offer. No detail or expense has been spared.

Spectacular views span fairways, greens and Corio Bay. And the 'Warhol Wall', featuring six limited edition signed prints by renowned 1960s pop artist Andy Warhol, is a not-so-subtle reminder that Curlewis is not your 'ordinary' golf club.

Within the clubhouse is casual gathering hub, Ivor's Spike Bar (named after living legend Curlewis member Ivor Chappell).

The Spike Bar is home to a more intimate, relaxed occasion. Signature restaurant and larger function facility, Claribeaux, will delight with its creative structural form and culinary options - French influence, contemporary fusion and a keen focus on sustainable local produce. The French onion soup could be best in the world.

www.claribeaux.com.au

THE PRO SHOP: Curlewis also has what can only be described as a 'next level' pro shop.

"The brief to golf shop design specialists Transform Golf was simply, 'not your old pudding golf club'. They got it and the result is a pro shop like no other in Australia - contemporary in look, feel and offerings," M Sharp says.

"There's still a bit of finessing and fine-tuning to be done but that's the fun bit, the operation is now finding its rhythm and the vibe is wonderfully positive."

Email: www.curlewisgolf.com.au



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