

GOLFING WITH GHOULS, DINOSAURS & DYNAMITE

•Molenheide The Forgotten Mine



by Rachel Read

The first minigolf course is thought to be “the Himalayas” putting green at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club in St Andrews, Scotland. The course, founded in 1867, was created for women who had become interested in the game, but for whom the violent movement of the standard golf swing would be too indecorously daring. Over the last century the game has settled into an often clichéd windmill-and-wishing-well outdoor concept. But the opening of The Forgotten Mine at Park Molenheide in Houthalen-Helchteren, Belgium in March 2008 is part of a growing trend to take this sport beyond a whimsical pastime to a fully fledged family entertainment experience.

Park Molenheide is a vacation complex in the picturesque Belgium countryside, in an historic mining region. Guests staying in the Molenheide bungalows can enjoy a number of high quality facilities, which now include the Forgotten Mine. Marc Vanherk, President, Board of Directors, Molenheide, comments, “We already have a beautiful and unique indoor playground and swimming paradise. We wanted to create an attraction with a low accessibility threshold for all ages. Adventure golf is a perfect combination of those positive factors.” Another priority was to have a sizeable year-round attraction. “The weather is not always great in Belgium.”

Because of the area’s history, the concept of theming the attraction around a forgotten mine legend has struck a chord with the locals. Educational elements were integrated into the experience. The regional Beringen and Houthalen mining museums were recruited to check the plans to make sure that the finish details conveyed authenticity. To add further depth and interest the theming interweaves a

legend of great treasure and strange characters: a lost adventurer, prehistoric creatures and a witch are all hidden in the mine, awaiting discovery by unsuspecting golfers.

What has been created is said to be the largest minigolf experience in Europe, comprising some 1,500 square meters and created for a relatively modest budget of 5 million Euros. The course is 18 holes and more than 7.5 meters high. Construction took 27,000 working hours, 450 square meters of concrete, 75 tons of spray concrete, 118 tons of steel and 7500 meters of boards. The attraction was built into an indoor tennis hall over several levels, with an elevator taking the visitor to the first hole. “Everything makes the experience special,” explains Vanherk. “Sound and light effects, the whole cohesion. There are no straight courses but organic forms, and every course has something special and unexpected. We didn’t want ordinary courses!” The key to the success of the attraction and the fit within Molenheide has been to take an enduringly popular game and enhance it with an interesting storyline and exciting interactive features. This has delivered a 90-minute, indoor

experience with broad appeal, that can be operated 10 hours a day, 365 days a year. There are also opportunities to reach out beyond the typical Molenheide visitor profile to serve new, lucrative customer communities such as corporate groups and minigolf federations.

This innovative project resonates with the local community and Molenheide operators demonstrated keen business acumen with the ability to bring the project in on time and within budget, and integrate it within their existing property. They are also realistic about the time it will take to position the attraction outside their core customer base. While hugely popular in the US, minigolf has not in the past enjoyed the same success in Europe, and Molenheide’s marketing emphasizes the unique, custom-made nature of the attraction. They are conservatively allowing three to five years to really position the attraction for day tourism.

Operators looking to develop an exciting indoor attraction with broad appeal would be wise to pack their putters and visit Belgium for a raucous round of golf with ghouls. 



Aiming for a hole in one at Molenheide The Forgotten Mine



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