



TOP 100 SPOTLIGHT

Utrecht de Pan

Chris Bertram suggests this largely unheralded Dutch heathland might be the best course you know little about.

There are many fine golf courses in mainland Europe, but in truth their number is dwarfed in comparison to the riches with which we are blessed in the British Isles.

The more one travels over the Channel, the more one realises the finest courses in our entire continent belong to Britain and Ireland. That view is not a slight on mainland Europe – it is a reflection of GB&I's extraordinary quality. Indeed, it occurs that we are incredibly complacent about the treasures on our doorstep.

Thus, in a hypothetical ranking of the whole of Europe (it is in practice too vast to be worthwhile), a rough estimate would see only around a dozen names from the mainland make the final cut. So, when travelling there, we always do so with realistic expectation; uncovering courses of the ilk of Muirfield, Royal County Down et al is highly unlikely. That is the attitude *Golf World* adopted prior to our visit to Utrecht de Pan. On this occasion, though, our expectations proved to be wildly inaccurate; it impressed so much we believe it would not merely warrant

entry to a European Top 100, but would be a contender for the top 20. You might reasonably ask why De Pan (with the Pan pronounced 'Pawn' by locals) surprised us so much, given we publish a Continental European Top 100. Well, unlike our GB&I version, where every course has usually been played numerous times by our panel, for the mainland European ranking we have until 2015 relied heavily on contributors from each country.

So while De Pan has always been in our list, it has generally flirted around No.25. A lofty position, but, now we know it intimately, arguably as many as 20 spots too low. In contrast, we have usually been encouraged to elevate the seaside courses of the Netherlands – Royal Hague, The Kennemer and Noordwijkse – to the top 10. That trio all impressed us too, but when we walked round the corner of De Pan's thatched-roof clubhouse and took in a view of classic heathland, it was a game changer. The 1st and 18th stretched before us in a scene that would pass for those nirvanas of heathland golf, Surrey and Berkshire. The names of De Pan's first two holes duly give an accurate, enticing description of what to expect here. The 1st is called 'Zandverstuiving', which translates to English as sand drift; and the

LEFT: A view of the 16th, 17th and 18th holes in more open, Walton Heath-esque terrain.
BELOW: The narrow opening to the fine 10th.



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2nd is 'Pijpestrootje' – meaning purple moor grass, which we can take to mean heather. Later, the 13th is titled 'Grove Den', which is Scots Pine in English. Sand, heather and pines – De Pan patently has the ingredients for a potent heathland.

The man who bound the raw materials together was Harry Colt, who is revered in the Netherlands like no course designer is in Britain. Colt designing a course is to the Dutch an indisputable stamp of excellence. They inform you a course is "by Colt" with a shrug and an expression that translates as 'so of course it is perfect'.

They are hardly misguided and HS Colt was prolific there in the 1920s, with five designs – De Pan, Royal Hague, Hilversumsche, Eindhoven and Kennemer – that are part of a collective called 'The Old Nine'. The others are Rosendaelsche, Noordwijkse, Broekpolder and Toxandria.

Colt created nine holes here in 1928. So masterfully did he route them in woodland and over terrain that is unusually hilly compared to the rest of the country (due to ice age residues that left a sandy ridge) that a second nine was soon added.

'Tranquility is expected and duly delivered. Only the rustle of deer, foxes and balls hitting trees is heard'

In a forest setting such as De Pan, tranquility is expected. It is duly delivered.

Only the rustle of deer, foxes and rabbits disturbing the leaf and pine-needle floor are heard, save for the sound of balls being swept away off tees, compressed against sandy turf or clattering wildly into trees. This peaceful environment is felicitous, for De Pan's aesthetic beauty deserves to be enjoyed without distraction. The trees are mature, but there is never an overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia, and that despite it being packed into only 125 acres. Heathland connoisseurs may like to see them thinned out here and there, but generally air and sunlight circulate freely – witness the blankets of heather. In the final few holes when the course opens up further à la Walton Heath, there are oceans of 'purple moor grass'.

There is minimal walking between the holes either, so your thirst for more classy fare is always quickly sated, and it will surely have been enjoyed by competitors in the 1982 Dutch Open, won by Paul Way. The course is now much too short for the elite as a result of it remaining much as Colt left it, save for some work by Frank Pont, who is notably skilled in restoring the Englishman's designs (see right). ■





THE DESIGNER'S VIEW

Top architect Frank Pont, a member at De Pan, assesses his home course.

Which are your favourite holes at De Pan?

I love holes 6 and 10, because they are so unique. Hole 6 must be one of the few holes in the world that has a blind tee shot and blind shot into the green, but still is very fun to play. Hole 10 is a driveable par 4 that you cannot drive due to the bottle neck at the driving distance. The hole is so simple, yet I always manage to score poorly on it. I like the hole so much that I built a sister hole, resembling

little disruption for the members each winter. Often my friends at De Pan ask me in the Spring what we have been doing that winter, which I take as a big compliment...

You are always sympathetic to Colt's original ideas, how easy was it to keep those and regain those at De Pan?

Very easy, the club is obviously conscious of its Colt heritage, and as such does not want to do things that are in conflict with Colt's

'The 10th is so beautifully simple, yet I always manage to score poorly on it'

the same playing strategies, at my newest course De Swinkelsche.

Can you give us a flavour of your work at De Pan?

Because the course is so good and little has been changed over time we have mostly done small restorative work; restoring bunkers, bringing back the original angles of the tees, restoring the original green sizes, restoring the short grass areas around the greens, widening the playing corridors back to their original sizes, cutting back tree growth and bringing back heather where possible. We have a 15-year plan doing these works, assuring very

philosophies. There are some areas where in the past some Colt elements unfortunately have been lost, such as the greens on the 5th, 7th and 11th.

What further plans do you have in mind for De Pan?

To restore the 7th green to its original using old aerial pictures. Green 5 is another altered green that does not fit with the rest. This situation is more complicated as the green was both altered and moved to a different location. It will need some thorough analysis and design work in the future to come up with a solution that has the same quality as the rest of the course.

ABOVE: The 9th is a solid par 4 played along an undulating fairway to a rather small green that is difficult to putt on. **LEFT:** The bunkers to the front of the 18th are penal, but otherwise this is a scoreable way to end a course that does not intimidate. **BELOW:** Typically characterful green complexes at this Dutch masterpiece.



De Pan's 1st, played under the judgemental gaze of the thatched-roofed clubhouse.

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Hosting Tour events may well not be hugely desirable for the members anyway. The 'Old Nine' clubs are similar to our Royal clubs, with strict entry criteria. Visitors are welcome though, from Monday to Thursday, booked in advance.

The club do not own the property, and with the lease running out were perhaps reluctant to invest in the course. With the club's future recently secured, the minor flaws that have crept into the course are being rectified. That sentence may surprise you, given previous high praise, but it is true De Pan has some holes where Colt may take issue were he to see it now.

Design connoisseurs would likely agree small alterations were worthwhile on the 5th, 7th and to a lesser extent the 11th. And yet some may absolutely love the 5th! This par 5 has a generous fairway but then you must decide if you can take on the almost 90° dog-leg to reach the green. This was not in the original routing and is exacerbated by tree growth, especially large beeches at the front of the green. Most will lay up to the left, avoiding the heather island, then hit a short pitch to an undulating green that is not typical 'Pan'.

At the 7th, this short par 4 turns acutely to the right to a sloping green – but a new bunker and tree growth have made a classic driveable par 4 too risky to take on. The 11th, another par 5, is a terrific hole but De Pan stalwarts dislike



ABOVE: A view across the open heathland terrain of the 16th and 17th fairways, both of which start on elevated tees and end on plateau greens. **LEFT:** The front nine is more enclosed than the second half. **RIGHT:** The narrow entrance to the 10th green is evident from the elevated tee – a gorgeous scene.

SEE NO EVIL

The very best of De Pan's blind holes.

There are as many as four holes with a blind shot of some sort at De Pan. Some golfers aren't keen on this aspect of golf course architecture, but we happen to rather enjoy it.

The first arrives at the 4th, a strong par-4 dog-leg to the right that starts with a blind drive off the backs and ends on a green connected to the 8th à la the Old Course.

Another comes along soon after on the fabulous 6th – in fact two do. It begins with a spectacular blind tee shot over a hill followed by an obscured approach to a tough green, so you have to wait a few moments to see the result of your efforts. The final one is on the 13th, arguably the most

difficult par 4 on the course. The tee shot must be kept on the right to ensure you have a view of the well-protected green with your long second, or you'll have a semi-blind approach on this dog-leg left.

That just leaves the 372-yard 10th – and what a specimen of a golf hole it is.

This is the epitome of the cute short par 4, encapsulating why they will always surely remain the easiest holes to fall in love with. Even off the elevated backs you will take a long iron or fairway wood to

find the narrow, undulating fairway that runs between tree-covered, heather-strewn hills on both sides. The view from both the tee and fairway are exquisite, scenes as good as most in GB&I. With a mid-iron in your hand you may well not have a view of the flag, for ridges eat into end of the fairway to leave a very slender entrance.

The green has distinct slopes and especially marked run-offs to the left. But this is no beast, eager to chew up a good score made on the front nine.

No, it is just one of the finest holes you will ever encounter.





the new green and extra length. These small negatives are overwhelmingly outweighed by the positives though. After the lovely opener – a beautiful short-ish par 5 with heather and trees on both sides of a generous, undulating fairway – you play the first of a collection of classy par 4s. The 2nd starts with a drive over heather, as most holes do here and at two other outstanding heathlands close by, Hilversumsche and Rosendaelsche. This is one of the more gentle two-shotters, with stiffer tests waiting ahead at the 6th, the 9th (which begins with a drive over the 8th green) and the 13th. Two of those, 6 and 13, include shots of a blind nature – quite a common theme at De Pan (see left).

The short holes are predictably magnificent. The first, at the 3rd, is played over a blaze of purple, then the 8th offers a more exacting affair of nearly 200 yards to a superbly-bunkered green with rolling surrounds. But the back nine's par 3s are even better, with the 12th showcasing Colt at his best; from an elevated tee you fire over an ocean of heather to a small well-bunkered green. It is De Pan's premier short hole, but only just, for the 15th is

'De Pan demands to be taken seriously as one of the finest courses in the whole of Europe'

also a wonderful mix of beauty and challenge due to sand and evil run-offs.

A high-calibre finish is a fait accompli, and De Pan's most aesthetically-pleasing section is signalled by the 14th. You drive from a very elevated tee trying to avoid a cross bunker then try to locate a sloping back-to-front green; anything short will in fast-running conditions give you a 25-yard pitch for your next shot.

Whereas most of De Pan is similar to Woking or Swinley Forest in its concise nature, 16 and 17 mimic the more open spaces of Walton Heath, with a blanket of heather connecting these gorgeous par 4s. Both start on elevated tees that enhance the view of the beautiful landscape and end on significantly elevated greens well protected with sand; in mainland Europe, there are few better back-to-back holes.

The 18th doesn't quite hit those heights but this pleasant par 5 is an appropriate

conclusion to an experience that effortlessly enchants rather than daunts.

De Pan demands to be taken seriously as one of the finest courses in the whole of Europe. It would, to this golfer's mind, be a masterpiece in any country in the world.

Yet you may fear we've been intoxicated with De Pan, so let's leave the last word to Guy Campbell, designer of West Sussex, who wrote in *The Times* about its first nine in 1929: "All players have conjured a vision of their ideal inland course. A course that shall incorporate all the fine features of a links, but with the light and shade, the aromatic scents, and vistas and backgrounds of red-boled, green-headed pines. An erring shot will not be lost. De Pan had every one of these rare qualities; as a dream course, it fills the bill." **GW**

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