



LIFE'S A BREEZE



Kalos is giving the concept of the luxury golf cruise a new dimension, says **Simon Jones**

Main picture: One of Kalos Golf Cruises' flagship yachts, Sea Cloud II
Right: Apart from swinging a golf club now and then, you don't have to lift a finger



Top left: If you don't want to hit golf balls, hit the beach

Top right: Top end clubs like Valderrama can be on your itinerary

Left: Kalos Cruise golfers discover great new venues, such as Golf Club Schloss Schoenborn in the heart of the Austrian wine-making region

Here's a good idea for your next golfing vacation. Trap yourself with a bunch of people you've never met before, cruise around coastal waters and rivers on an old boat for a couple of weeks, and play a round or two in that golfing Mecca of, er, Hungary. It's the stuff holiday disasters are made of, isn't it? And just think, you could've been playing at legendary destinations like Sandy Lane, Kapalua or Le Touessrok. In fact, you could've spent a month idling in those idyllic locales for the price you'd pay Kalos Golf for just the sort of vacation described above.

Yet Kalos, based in North Carolina, has one of the most loyal customer bases of any high-end travel company around. These "gluttons for punishment" keep coming back year after year, and they are reportedly none too keen to have the world know more. "Please don't write about how much fun these cruises are," they pleaded with one seasoned travel writer who was experiencing the product first hand. But that wasn't me, so sorry about that.

Kalos Golf is undoubtedly one of the best-kept secrets at the more

discerning end of the golf travel market and when you dig beneath the surface it becomes apparent why this low profile firm has enjoyed sustained success and huge repeat business since its founding in 1994. Part of the attraction is undoubtedly its unusual itineraries, but also the incredible attention to detail.

"We try to be full service and provide unique opportunities for our guests to do things they could not necessarily do on their own," says Kalos' President, Jim Lamont. "Be it a private concert, a private tour of the Sistine Chapel or access to a world-class private golf course, we strive to offer something unique. We continually look for ways to improve our service. We have a fleet of golf buggies in Europe and in New Zealand that we rotate by truck to meet us at each course we play. Once we arrive at a course we try to offer the same level of service that our guests would expect at their home course."

Nope, this isn't like any golf cruise you will have been on before. In addition to providing great golf in historic locations, Kalos Golf arranges daily tours for those not playing golf. Expert guides lead these tours to explore the treasures of the area.

That cruise to Hungary was actually just part of a trip up the Danube, surely one of the world's most beautiful rivers. It took in golf at Pannonia Golf and Country Club outside Budapest, which hosted the 2002 Hungarian Open, Fontana Golf Club outside Vienna, Golf Club Schloss Schonborn, a wonderful old-style venue laid out in a forest on the grounds of a 300-year-old castle, the Bernhard Langer-designed Brunnwies Golf Club over the border in Germany, ranked among the top 20 courses in Europe, and the Graham Marsh-designed Golf am Habsberg in Velburg in Germany, which is highly ranked among all European courses. There were also tours of Budapest and Vienna on the

itinerary for golfers and non-golfers alike. Oh, and that "old boat" will be something just a bit special.

When you glide into the port just watch as curious onlookers gaze in wonder from the shore. Two distinct types of ships are used on its golf cruises, which are leased from a company based in Hamburg, Germany; a pair built for the rivers of Europe and another duo that sails on the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

All feature cabins and staterooms with mahogany furniture and marble bathrooms, while decks and railings are made from teak. These are luxury yachts not liners - they can accommodate from 60-odd to 90-odd passengers and are, effectively, private clubs providing the perfect atmosphere for an intimate travel experience.

Kalos' "flagship" is the Sea Cloud, built for heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post by financier E. F. Hutton in 1931. He spared no

expense to create the largest private sailing ship ever built at that time. In the 30s and 40s the Sea Cloud was host to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Sweden's King Gustavus V. Conventional ships simply could not duplicate the special ambience of the Sea Cloud - the graciousness of a bygone era and the intimacy and comfort of a small European hotel.

It sleeps up to 64 passengers and has nearly as many crew, who keep the teak decks pristine and tend to the 32,000 square feet of sails.

There's a wonderful Lido Deck with lounge chairs and a well-stocked bar with fresh Cuban cigars. And it goes without saying that the food is top drawer and plentiful - in addition to the excellent main meals there are afternoon teas, groaning sandwich boards and even make-your-own-sundae orgies (with melted Swiss chocolate).

Those off on a golf trip or a city tour also get their own cooler bags with

Top left: Relaxing on the deck of the Sea Cloud

Below: Countries like Austria provide Kalos Cruises with some memorable and pleasantly surprising golf experiences

Top right: The social side to Kalos Golf Cruises is as important as the range of activities

Bottom left and right: You may be on board a small yacht but the facilities are on par with the best hotels



This page: Kalos clients enjoy the superb Beckenbauer Golf Course, Bad Griesbach, Germany, designed by Bernhard Langer



“ People are looking for different travel experiences and they want to do so comfortably and conveniently with their friends ”

bread and meat, fruit, yogurt, sweets and drinks. “Most of our cruises accommodate about 90 guests, of which 60 to 70 will be golfers, which is great because we can have shotgun starts throughout the trip,” says Lamont. “The social side of golf is huge on our trips. We are able to accommodate the more serious golfer by offering good golf options and other good golfers to match up with. But we also have golfers who are serious about enjoying themselves and they won’t let the golf get in their way. We have friendly competitions each day, but there are always side bets going.”

But what about that enclosed environment? Surely it can be a recipe for disastrous personality conflicts?

“Our trips tend to draw like minded travellers,” insists Lamont. “Passengers come on board with friends and end up making new friends. Inevitably they realise that they have some connection with other passengers on board. We have clients who met on a Kalos Golf cruise and plan other trips together. The good thing about a group of 90 is that there is always someone new to dine with or get a game with. We often do random dinner seating and golf pairings, not every day, but at least once or twice.

Annually, Kalos Golf offers 13 to 16 trips with itineraries featuring the British Isles, Danube, France, Iberia, Northern Italy, Normandy, Classic Rhine, Riviera and Spain. Others are in the pipeline and will be added

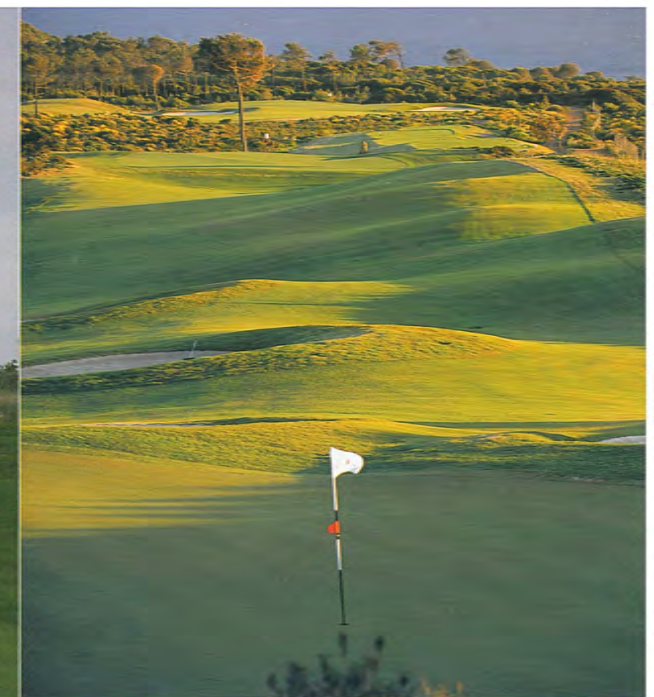
only when the company knows the product will be up to their usual standards.

“Any successful business listens to their customers and that is what we try to do,” says Lamont. “Our clients often feel they are part of the Kalos Golf family and they are eager to give us ideas and suggestions. We can be slow, however, to roll out a new itinerary. For example, it took us two years and four extensive site visits to New Zealand before we felt we could bring our clients there. As we speak we have a person in Tasmania who is visiting various golf courses so that we can explore a 2009 Australia Golf Cruise.”

“In addition to Australia, we should be rolling out a Dutch Waterways Golf Cruise in May 2009 through The Netherlands and Belgium,” adds Lamont. “This trip promises a mixture of great golf (Royal Waterloo, Royal Zoute, Nordwijkse, etc) with plenty of history and glorious flowers at Keukenhof Gardens and the Aalsmeer Flower Auction. Although this is not new, we are hoping to once again offer a British Open Golf Cruise in 2009, that would start in Dublin, attend The Open Championship at Turnberry and finish in Edinburgh. Along the way we will play golf at Royal County Down, Royal Portrush, Machrinhash, Royal Dornoch, Cruden Bay and Kingsbarns. A great line up.”

Every Kalos cruise includes the finest golf in the region, and even when touring well-trodden golfing locations like southern Iberia there are a few surprises. The tour here takes in Penha Longa near Lisbon, then Montecastillo, a Jack Nicklaus design about an hour’s drive from Cadiz in Spain. Then comes the mouthwatering sequence of Valderrama, the 1997 Ryder Cup venue, the legendary Sotogrande, and El Saler, a links style course near Valencia which is off the beaten path for most golfers visiting Spain, but is not to be missed.

Golf is played roughly every other day on most cruises, so in this case there’s an opportunity to take the day-long tour inland to the



Opposite: The luxurious River Cloud tours Europe's finest inland waterways
Top left and right: Visby Golf Club near Stockholm and Oitavos near Lisbon are two of the hidden gems that Kalos has unearthed
Left: Cruising allows you explore the beautiful interior regions of countries like Austria

Alhambra, the 14th-century Moorish castle-turned-museum in Granada, plus the English colony of Gibraltar, while the few non-golfers always have their own activity, usually an extended tour (that golfers can go on if they don't want to play a round that day). Guest hosts are invited to join the cruises to provide golf instruction, education and great company. Past hosts have included world-famous golf course architect Rees Jones, teaching legend Peggy Kirk Bell and sports psychologist Dr. Bob Rotella. Sometimes golf professionals from prestigious country clubs host trips for club members and their friends. But with stock market jitters striking a dagger into the financial confidence of the western economies, is there a chance the demand for \$15,000 per person cruises (and that doesn't include the air fares) may dry up?

"The demographic trends in the US suggest that the demand will

continue to grow for high end golf and travel experiences," says Lamont. "A banker on one of our first trips explained to me that right now we have the greatest accumulation of wealth in the history of the world. That combined with the fact that people are living longer and healthier than ever, bodes well for high end travel. People are looking for different travel experiences and they want to do so comfortably and conveniently with their friends.

"At the end of the day people want to travel with friends but don't want the hassle of packing and unpacking, or deciding who wants to eat where each night. They regularly comment that they do not want to have to sweat the details so that they can enjoy themselves." Sweating over details is the last thing these lucky vacationers have to do on their floating country club as they enjoy a tour of some of the best golf in the world at a truly leisurely pace. ■