

Chào buổi sáng, Việt Nam!*

*Good morning, Vietnam!

AUSTRALIAN GOLF DIGEST deputy editor **Tim Matchett** discovers what makes a golf trip to Vietnam so special.

HOW annoying is it running into Australians overseas? Well, not all the time, such as being stuck in a strange foreign land suffering from homesickness and finding a similar-accented chum to share stories with.

But you know the type. You'll be walking through the markets in Thailand or along the beach in Fiji, enjoying the experience of a different culture, a different outlook on life, smiling friendly locals greeting you in the street, and the serenity is cut with the sound of a loudmouth Australian bragging about how much beer he drank for \$1 the night before or whingeing about the outrageous price of a market souvenir they believe should be 40c instead of 55c.

It happens in every country, but there's something about Asia that can bring out the worst in us. Perhaps it's the incredibly cheap price of accommodation, food and drinks that puts us in the mindset of expecting everything for nothing.

But that's where Vietnam can be your

friend, not foe, and golf the tool to get away from the Australian-beaten track and discover new areas, towns and sights for yourself. Not that the golf courses in Vietnam are set in small rural towns away from tourists. Far from it. Golf in Vietnam is not the common man's game; most people you come across on the courses are from South Korea, Japan and China – not the local Vietnamese towns.

But there is a chance to do both – to enjoy the incredible golf on offer in a diverse, different and often unique setting and to explore local towns away from tourists where you can soak in what real Vietnam has to offer.

It's this mix of the luxurious golf scene and 'real' Vietnamese life that's what's so special in Vietnam. One moment you're on a world-class, pristine golf course; the next you're in a delightfully run-down restaurant overlooking some rice fields and mingling with a local family and learning what life in Vietnam is all about.

It's no Bali, Dubrovnik, Phuket or London, and that's exactly what you want.>>

If you can only play one course in Vietnam, make it **Laguna Lang Co**. It's not necessarily the country's best course – your next stop will give you an idea of the stiff competition – but its right up there, and the setting and variation have to be seen to be believed.

Laguna Lang Co is only an hour's drive north of Vietnam's third-largest city, Da Nang, but has a distinctly quiet and serene atmosphere. The course is named after the nearby ocean-front town of Lang Co, which boasts pristine, white-sand beaches and wild mountains to the west.

The course was designed by Sir Nick Faldo, who is rightfully proud of what has been achieved. Thick jungle, where rugged mountains plunged into the East China Sea, and wild sand dunes have been transformed into a world-class links course with an incredible setting.

Laguna Lang Co is the country's newest course, having had its official opening in March. Media from around the world, including **AUSTRALIAN GOLF DIGEST**, were invited to the event and saw first-hand what makes the latest Faldo Design project so exciting and unique.

The success of Laguna has been

embracing the natural and exciting terrain in the course's design, as well as providing plenty of variation through 18 holes. The course weaves through contrasting landscapes – ocean, jungle, rice fields, rivers – but does so seamlessly and sometimes without you even noticing. Quite simply, Faldo and his design team have let the beautiful landscape speak for itself.

One of the most stunning holes is the par-3 11th, which deceives you from the approach. The steps up to the tee are slightly obscured by thick jungle trees; after leaving the 10th it's quite easy to miss the hole altogether. But as you walk up the steps you're confronted with a steep mountain side with giant boulders peppered along the edge, allowing you to feel not just surrounded by the landscape but part of it too.

All around the course are characteristics typical of south-east Asia, from the rice plains, the small fishing boat on hole 4 and the course workers you come across weeding the fairways by hand, wearing the traditional Vietnamese straw hat (Nón lá). There's no escaping that you're in Vietnam when you play at Laguna, moreso than the country's other courses, and it's what makes Laguna an amazing experience.

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Australian Golf Digest: How would you describe the Laguna Lang Co layout?

Sir Nick Faldo: The site has what we're always looking for. If you can create different



environments for golfers throughout the round, that's the in-thing now – you want a different feel, requiring different shots. I think this course is going to hold up against better courses in the region and maybe even the world, who knows?

It's got a great feel about it. It's got the rice field look, the beach, jungles and blowouts when you get to 15. That's a pretty unique look. Even when you look down the 10th, there are virtually three separate fairways. The rock outcrop on 11 has turned out really nicely.

There are really good outlooks on this golf course. There's the beach (on 9), a really good ambience and what [the developer] Banyan Tree brings to a resort makes this one of the best. All in all, it's got a really good feel about it.

AGD: What is your favourite hole?

NF: I love hole 11 (*below*) at the moment. And walking off 10 is really cool. When I saw this in the wild I thought, 'Wow, are we going to really walk through a three-foot gap on to the tee and see all that jungle and rocks?'

And standing on

the 15th green is a really great look. I like those two spots on the course.

AGD: The greens here are tough. Was that intentional?

NF: Yes, they're pretty dramatic. It depends what pace they're going to be played at. When you come to a project there's always the thought of, 'What have you seen before?' It's nice to make rolling greens. They were always going to be big.

AGD: Do you believe in the concept of signature holes?

NF: I call them postcard holes. I come to every project with no preconceived ideas. There's no such thing as a "Faldo look". We fit with the environment. I like being on site doing it.

There's always going to be a couple of postcard holes. At Laguna there are [holes] 5, 11, 17 and 18. I think the second shot into 17 is a good look. I'd like to have 18 postcard holes if possible.

'It's got a great feel about it. It's got the rice field look, the beach, jungles and blowouts when you get to 15. That's a pretty unique look.'
– Sir Nick Faldo

AGD: Do you get excited about other courses? You seem very passionate about this one.

NF: Yes I am. This project moved along pretty quickly. A lot of projects take for ever. My last few projects have been well received. Roco Ki in the Dominican Republic; Lough Erne has a different feel. If you have a good piece of land you try and enhance what nature is trying to do.

AGD: What are the attractions of golf in Vietnam?

NF: Vietnam is one of the emerging nations and everything is on the up. The doors have been opened and everyone is starting to see it. It's a



beautiful country with culture and 5-star resorts. I think it's on the verge of people discovering what Vietnam is all about.

AGD: What about the golf scene in Vietnam?

NF: I don't really know. I dropped in to this project. I did Ocean Dunes [at Phan Thiet in the mid 1990s] when I was a 30,000-foot architect. These days I'm much more hands on. I hope this course will be a good calling card. I'd like people to come see it.

AGD: What makes this project so appealing?

NF: They key to what makes this project exciting is the six looks – rice, jungle, beach, sand, rock outcrop and river. We're so excited because there so many visual looks and environments.

AGD: How would you score on the course?

NF: I haven't played it. I'm going to play some holes this afternoon. Luckily, I don't have to put a score on a card anymore, just play for fun.

AGD: What is the hardest thing about the course?

NF: The weirdest thing is that from the top of the clubhouse today, I couldn't get over how we've manicured the jungle. Before, just to get to the first tee was a real effort. Now it's clear. It was a serious walk to get to the tee. We had to go through jungles and rivers, watching for snakes.

I was sitting in the clubhouse thinking it's all so easy now. It was the real fun part of the project. We would walk for six hours [during the planning

and construction phase]. It was a real effort. Now it's really enjoyable to see it come from jungle. It was a massive transformation.

There's a flip video on faldo.com showing there were little bridges, one on 10 in particular that we had to cross the river and we were making bridges as we went. It was a really fun project. I enjoyed it.

(Clockwise from top) Rice fields around several holes on the front and back nine at Laguna are a visual treat; the natural sand base gave course designer Sir Nick Faldo the opportunity to create magnificently wild bunkers; looking back along the 10th fairway at sunrise; a steep mountain edge provides the setting at the 11th; a true Vietnamese look to hole 13.



I just want people to come and make their own judgement. I think they're going to say "Wow". We just want to create the wow factor. I think people are going to come away and think this is a really interesting spot.

AGD: What advice do you have for the Vietnam Golf Association?

NF: Create an opportunity. I hope the Vietnam Golf Association creates events for juniors to play, then we can create events. That's what I do with my Faldo Series. Get kids interested and then develop. I hope we can create an event here.

On the professional side, the knowledge is there – the swing, the dietary side, everything to produce successful players.

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If you were cynical you'd swear this happened on purpose, visiting Greg Norman's course second after Nick Faldo's. There's a cruel second meaning to be dug out of it.

But whatever Norman lost to Faldo in 1996 he gets back in course design, having designed what is widely believed to be one of the best golf courses in Asia, let alone Vietnam.

The Dunes Course at **Danang Golf Club** is undoubtedly the course against which all others in Vietnam are compared. Set in the rolling sand dunes along the coast just south of Da Nang city, the Dunes Course has received countless accolades from golf media around the world.

Its opening in 2010 marked the continuing emergence of golf in Vietnam at a time when the market was shrinking in Australia, the US and many countries around the world. The opening of Laguna this year shows that that emergence in Vietnam hasn't slowed down, and much of that is thanks to the high profile of Danang Golf Club around the world.

Similarly to Laguna Lang Co, what makes the Dunes Course so special is its preservation and celebration of the natural surroundings. Danang doesn't have the dramatic jungle and

mountainous setting that Laguna has, but the dunes on which the course is set provide a wonderful environment.

"The fact is, you'd be doing a very poor job to make a boring course out of a site like this," said Norman in 2010 during the course's construction.

The par 72 championship course is a fantastic challenge, in no small part due to its bunkering that's typical of a Norman-designed course. There is a wonderful mix of the traditional bunkers and the natural sandtraps with tufts of grass that weave through much of the course.

The signature hole is undoubtedly the 135m par-3 16th, with a picture-perfect ocean backdrop that includes the Cham Islands on a clear day. Reaching the green when the East China Sea winds are up is a challenge, and once on the green you're bound to take a few minutes to soak in the view of the countless fishing boats cruising up and down the coastline. It's also a fantastic reminder that you're in Vietnam; there are some holes on which you could be forgiven for thinking you were on a European links course.

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It was a unanimous response as I sat with the other members of the media group at the Ocean Villas and somebody asked what the highlight of the trip had been so far. We'd played at the Greg Norman-designed Danang Golf Club that day and still had superb memories of Laguna Lang Co fresh in our minds. We relaxed into our comfy chairs next to our private pool and sipped on 18-year-old single malt Scotch.

"The caddies, for sure," said one of the group. "They really make the golf special in Vietnam." It was the simple interactions with our caddies, not the extravagant luxury we were experiencing, that were the lasting memories for each. And it's those interactions that make golf in Vietnam so unforgettable.

Almost all caddies in Vietnam are



↑eat

Food markets are the place to be for incredible dishes made right in front of you from the freshest ingredients. Hoi An's Central Food Hall is a good place to start.



⚠caution

Be prepared for 'cyclo' drivers (far left) hassling you to go for a ride; (below) Learn how to say a firm "No" to avoid getting ripped off by street vendors.



SPEAK!

hello **chào (jow)**
please **làm ơn (lam uhn)**
thank you **cám ơn (gam uhn)**
no worries **không sao (kohng sao)**
yes **vâng**
no **không (kohng)**

←go

Check out the Citadel (left) in Hue, the former imperial capital of Vietnam; (right) the river along the UNESCO heritage site of Hoi An is perfect for a meander.



↓getting there

It can appear your only way to Vietnam is an annoying detour via Singapore or Thailand but Vietnam Airlines flies direct to Ho Chi Minh City from Melbourne and Sydney. It saves a lot of time and hassle.



←stay

There are plenty of options in Vietnam for any budget. If you want to stay close to the golf courses, you can't go past the following for pure luxury:

- 1 Banyan Tree
- 2 Ocean Villas
- 3 Angsana Lang Co



↑do

Make some time to do some people watching. There's nothing better than having a beer in a restaurant on the road and soaking up the atmosphere.



(clockwise from left) Danang Golf Club's signature hole, the par-3 16th; carrying the bunkers is a must on 11; the caddies at all three courses make Vietnam golf unforgettable; the view of Danang's 10th fairway; natural sand traps and pines frame the 12th green.

employed from the surrounding towns and villages and carry with them incredible life stories that are vastly different from the visiting golfer.

One of the caddies, a 19-year-old from Da Nang, came from an extremely poor area and had become her family's highest earner from her tips alone – usually \$10-20 per day. The juxtaposition between many caddies' work in expensive five-star resorts and their humble home life is something that stays with you long after you've finished your round together.

In a country where unemployment is high and incomes are low, work as a caddie is highly sought-after. Laguna Golf Club general manager Tim Haddon – an Australian incidentally – recalls the day last October when he interviewed prospective caddies for the soon-to-be-opened course.

"I thought we might expect 30 to 50 candidates but more than 250 arrived within the first hour," says Haddon. "By the end of recruitment day we had interviewed 437."

The caddies are taught about golf's history, equipment, rules, etiquette and how to read greens. Daily English classes are also part of the training, although a lot of fun is to be had for visiting golfers learning some Vietnamese around the course.

One of the potential drawbacks about golf in Vietnam is feeling too removed from the surrounding towns and villages, particularly if you're spending all your time in resorts. But the presence of the caddies does much to allay this feeling, lending a friendly, warming atmosphere to your round. You'll want to ditch the resort dinner and head into town with your caddie for





a beef pho and the sensory overload of the food markets.

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"I'm sure it'll be Danang again," said one of my travelling companions from the UK. A group of us were preparing to play **Montgomerie Links**, virtually next door to Danang Golf Club, and while I would have to rush to the airport afterwards to fly home, my British playing partners had an extra day in Vietnam and were discussing where they'd play.

It was easy to assume that Danang would be the better of the two courses in the area, not least because every golfer

we came across at the start of the trip seemed to say, "Just wait till you play Norman's course..." After the hype leading up to Laguna's grand opening and playing at the renowned Dunes Course, Montgomerie Links had slipped below everyone's radar.

Your first impression of Montgomerie Links is the incredible colour, the vibrant green of the fairways and greens, and the interesting bunkering. The native vegetation that surrounds the fairways provides points of interest throughout the course and combines with the sandy soil for a true links-style course. The indigenous casuarina pines are also a major feature of the course.

(Clockwise from top left) The stunning par-5 12th at Montgomerie Links has it all; the view of the 9th green from the 1st tee; enjoying the sanctuary feeling to the hidden-away 5th green; a great challenge from the tee of the 187m par-3 11th with bunkers guarding the front of the green.

Another par 72 championship course, Montgomerie Links is both challenging and a lot of fun.

One of the most enjoyable holes is the par-3 14th, perhaps because it's the first hole after relaxing with a beer at the outhouse. The raised tee gives you a great perspective of the inland lake, bunkers and casuarina pines that guard the green. At 200 metres from the back tee, there isn't much room for error. The hole description in the course guide simply has a quote from Colin Montgomerie: "Give it all you've got."

The reaction to Montgomerie Links from our group was unanimous: It's a fantastic course. As we debated which of the three had been the best, one of the group had a salient point:

"We're trying to find negatives in each one to figure out the best course, but it's kind of irrelevant. They're all amazing, 10-out-of-10 courses that you'd want to play any day." ●

Vietnam's No.1

Five minutes with pro Michael Tran

→ You came fifth at this year's New Zealand PGA Championship, how was that?

It was a good feeling. I actually started playing golf in New Zealand when I was there for school about 10 years ago. It was nice to come back and finish fifth in the tournament.

→ Which course did you learn at in New Zealand?

At Akarana in Auckland. I then went back to Vietnam for a year and then went to high school in the US.

→ Did you play college golf?

No, I did a golf management course instead and then came back and played professional golf in Asia. Now I live in Ho Chi Minh City.

→ What's your favourite golf course?

There's a lot. The Hills in Queenstown was very cool, it had the nicest scenery that a golf course can be on. I've also played Pebble Beach, which was nice too.

→ Have you been to Australia?

Yes, I actually first learnt English in Sydney.

I stayed there for a couple of months before I went to Auckland. I learnt at a school at Campbelltown, there was a university there and they did courses for kids to go there and learn English.

→ What do you think of the three golf courses around Da Nang?

I like all three of the courses around Da Nang, they are the best courses in Vietnam so far – good design, good condition, and good weather for golf. I would love to see an Asian Tour tournament at one of these three courses one day.

→ Is golf growing yet among everyday people in Vietnam?

Everyone is looking at Vietnam as a growing golf market. But to me it is not since you can't count [only] on tourists and businessmen, wealthy people taking up the game and playing the game as growth of the sport. There are no junior programs here; green fees are still too expensive for kids to play. For me if I don't see kids taking up the game... golf isn't growing for me.