

LURE OF THE YELLOW STAR

Vietnam's growing appetite for golf

Ask any reputable golf course designer to nominate his favourite type of land for a golf course, and chances are he'll say, "Duneland beside the sea". This is, after all, the DNA of some of the world's great golf courses ... in Scotland, England, Ireland, southern Australia and the north-west coast of the United States.

But classic links land, featuring sand dunes that separate the coast from productive farming country, is almost impossible to find in Asia.

So when former world number-one players, Greg Norman and Nick (now Sir Nick) Faldo, along with eight-times European Order of Merit winner Colin Montgomerie, separately discovered seaside duneland in Vietnam they each jumped at the chance to put their name on a course there.

The three former big names of tournament golf, all of whom have designed golf courses around the world, headed straight for Vietnam's central coast. Here, facing the South China Sea (or East Sea as it is called in Vietnam) midway between Ho Chi Minh City and the nation's capital Hanoi, is Vietnam's third largest city, Danang. Now, among Danang's many claims to fame is another: arguably, the best golf course country in Asia.

Bookended by the World Heritage-listed cities of Hoi An and Hue, in the past three years Danang has emerged as the world's newest and most exciting golf tourism destination.

When Colin Montgomerie's eponymous Montgomerie Links opened in 2009 a few eyebrows were raised about the suitability of Danang for a tourism-

dependent golf development. There was, after all, no previous history of golf in the area and therefore no obvious domestic market of players, the city's dilapidated airport desperately needed upgrading and the land where the course was built had to be scoured for unexploded shells from the Vietnam War, four decades earlier.

But the owners, IndoChina Land - a division of IndoChina Capital, Vietnam's leading real estate development and funds management company with interests in hotels, resorts, apartments and golf courses throughout the country - had foresight and an understanding of what would bring tourists to the region.

In a nutshell, this was upmarket tourism infrastructure to match the region's many cultural, historic and scenic attractions.

Not only is ideal golf course land hard to find, so are undeveloped perfect white-sand beaches. Danang has both. What's more, the 25km stretch of sand from Danang to Hoi An is the home of famous My Khe beach ('China Beach' as it was later dubbed), where US Marines landed in 1965 and established a base that became famous due partly to a late 1980s TV series. It is now a virtual tourist attraction in itself.

By the time Monty came to play and officially open his exquisite layout in April 2010, Danang had turned the corner. New hotels and resorts were springing up on the shoreline, across the road from Montgomerie Links. The region's one super luxury resort, The Nam Hai (also owned by IndoChina Land) had been joined by new four and five star properties, and a second golf course, Danang Golf Club, designed by Greg Norman, had just been completed next door.



Words & Images: Paul Myers



(left) Danang Golf Club, Hole 16 (right) Hole 10





Danang Golf Club, Monkgorie Links



“Now, among Danang’s many claims to fame is another: arguably, the best golf course country in Asia”

Developed by VinaCapital Group, Vietnam’s leading asset management company, Danang GC is a classic links course that is complemented by an associated resort development, villas and, on the drawing boards, another 18 holes that will meander through wetlands away from the coast.

Strikingly different to its neighbour, the golf course’s general manager, Australian PGA member Ben Styles, says it offers a “one-off” golf experience in Vietnam.

“There’s nothing else like it here or anywhere else in Asia. It is totally unique, and now that we’re in our third year, the fairways and greens have settled down beautifully. Everyone who walks off the 18th green says it is a pleasure to play.”

As soon as Danang GC opened, the region began to look and feel like a golf

destination after all. Then came news that Banyan Tree Hotels & resorts – which owns and operates upmarket resorts in Thailand, China, Indonesia, Mexico and the Middle East – had engaged Sir Nick Faldo to design a golf course near Lang Co, a fishing village 50 kilometres north of Danang on the way to Vietnam’s imperial capital of Hue.

The multiple-character layout has all the ingredients to become Asia’s best new golf course. Its Zoysia fairways and Tiff Eagle greens are growing in beautifully and will be in prime condition for the official opening by the designer himself in mid-March.

“We are really pleased with the way the course is coming along,” says Laguna Lang Co’s director of golf, Tim Haddon. “Sir

(first & second) Laguna Lang Course
(bottom) Danang GC 10th hole



“The multiple-character layout of laguna Lang has all the ingredients to become Asia’s best new golf course with its Zoysia fairways and Tiff Eagle greens”

Nick wanted a hard bump-and-run type of surface and that’s how it will play”.

Green fees are VND 1,840,000 (approx. MYR 269) for visitors on weekdays and 2,440,000 (approx. MYR 356) at weekends. Hotel guests play for about 15 percent less.

Memberships are being sold to the golf club for the equivalent of a MYR 80,000 entry price plus MYR 2450 per year, while members of the resort’s club facilities will receive discounts to play golf.

Laguna Lang Co offers a different and more varied golf experience than Montgomerie Links or Danang Golf Club’s Dunes course. All three courses are members of Golf Coast Vietnam, a destination-marketing program that promotes the Central Coast’s golf tourism attributes.

Faldo, who won six Major championships, was renowned as a tactician and an innate ability to think his way around a course. He has ensured that guile rather than grunt are the key elements to mastering the par-71 Laguna Lang Co layout.

Playing a relatively short 6961 yards (6365 metres) from the back tees, longer hitters need to think carefully about club

selection to avoid waste areas, strategically placed mounds – with long grass – and mid-fairway bunkers that demand a choice between attempting to hit over or play short for the second shot.

Laguna Lăng Cô Golf Club’s appeal lies in its ever-changing character. Starting from an open rice-paddy-style environment beside a large lake, the layout moves towards the edge of a mountainous forest area before swinging towards the beach at the ninth hole and heading homeward through coastal duneland.

The course’s opening in December coincided with Vietnam being named golf destination of the year for Asia and Australasia by the International Association of Golf Tourism Operators (IAGTO) at its annual convention in Portugal in November.

Nowhere else in Vietnam, including Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, have the quality of courses on the Central Coast. The region’s appeal as a golf tourism destination is also enhanced by its UNESCO World Heritage-listed Hoi An Ancient Town south of Danang and Hue monuments in the former imperial capital, just an hour’s drive from Laguna Lang Co.

