

# The Golf Coast is making waves



Thailand isn't the only destination in Southeast Asia that offers superb golf and world class hospitality

*by Paul Myers*

**V** IETNAM HAS COME ONTO the radar of Middle East golfers, thanks to Emirates' new daily service from Dubai to Ho Chi Minh City that began in June. The route opens up a realm of exciting golf options in Indo China, none the least of which is Vietnam's Central Coast.

Here, near the country's third largest city of Danang, are three

world-class courses, each designed by one of the modern greats of the game. Collectively, they have made the region one of Asia's most exciting new golf destinations and undoubtedly were a major reason for Vietnam's award by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators (IAGTO) in November as golf destination of the year in Asia and Australasia.

Built on classic duneland facing the South China Sea (called the East Sea in Vietnam), their attraction is the paucity of true links courses in Asia. It is so rare that Greg Norman, Colin Montgomerie and Sir Nick Faldo each jumped at the chance to put their name on a course there.

Bookended by the World Heritage-listed cities of Hoi An and Hue,

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 and golfers to the region.

In a nutshell, this was upmarket tourism infrastructure to match the many cultural, historic and scenic attractions within an hour of the city.

As far as the site is concerned, the developers hit the jackpot. For not only is ideal golf course land hard to find, so are undeveloped perfect white-sand beaches. Danang has both. What's more, the 25-kilometre 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 an important base and R&R centre during the Vietnam War (or American War as locals refer to it). Popularised by a 1980s TV series, China Beach is now a virtual tourist attraction in itself.

By the time Monty came to play and officially open his layout in April 2010, Danang had turned the corner. New hotels and resorts had sprung up on

Danang leapt on to Asia's golf stage when Montgomerie's eponymous Montgomerie Links opened in 2009.

It was a bold move. There was, after all, no previous history of golf in the area and 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, Vietnam's leading real estate

**LEFT AND ABOVE: THE SPECTACULAR GREG NORMAN-DESIGNED DANANG GOLF CLUB HAS BEEN HAILED AS ONE OF THE BEST NEW COURSES IN ASIA.**

**ABOVE BOTTOM: VIETNAM'S RENOWNED CADDIES ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE GOLFING EXPERIENCE.**

*Danang has ideal golf course land and perfect white-sand beaches in abundance.*



ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: THE MONTGOMERIE LINKS WAS THE COURSE THAT FIRST PUT DANANG ON THE GOLFING MAP. LEFT: DANANG GOLF CLUB IS CONSIDERED A MODERN LINKS AND ONE OF THE MOST UNIQUE COURSES ON THE CONTINENT.

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 former imperial capital of Hue.

Entrenching Vietnam's Central Coast as a legitimate golf destination was the naming by US Golf Digest in its June 2012 edition of Danang Golf Club and Montgomerie Links as, respectively, the number one and three courses in Vietnam. Late in 2011, Montgomerie Links was named at the Asia Pacific Golf Summit as the country's number one course, with Danang GC chosen as its best new course.

Opened in December (2012), Laguna Lang Co Golf Club, with – initially – two on-site high-end hotels, brings critical mass and matching quality to the region's golf tourism credentials.

*As soon as Danang GC opened, the region began to look & feel like a golf destination.*

the shoreline, some right opposite the course. The region's one super luxury resort, The Nam Hai was quickly joined by new four and five star properties. Then a second golf course, Danang Golf Club, designed by Greg Norman, was built next door and Danang was on Vietnam's fledgling golf map.

Developed by VinaCapital Group, Vietnam's leading asset management company, Danang GC is a modern 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," he explains. "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 and Resorts, the company which owns and operates



ABOVE: VARIETY IS THE HALLMARK OF LAGUNA LANG CO GOLF CLUB, DESIGNED BY SIX-TIME MAJOR CHAMPION SIR NICK FALDO.

Its essence is variety, changing from open rice paddy to woodlands and sand dunes by the sea, offering a true surprise on every tee. A fourth course – Ba Na Hills, designed by former world number one Luke Donald, and located in the coastal hinterland – has been in stop-start mode for the past two years and there is now uncertainty if it will be completed.

Even so, three courses in one region delivers critical mass, which has prompted the trio to come together

in a destination-marketing program to promote golf on the Central Coast. Known as Golf Coast Vietnam (www.golfcoastvietnam.com) the group's emergence is a bold statement that what is good for each course individually is likely to benefit all collectively and the region too.

The arrival of Emirates flights into Ho Chi Minh City complements services by Etihad and major European and Asian airlines, while low-cost carrier Air Asia flies direct to Danang's

WHERE TO PLAY

- 1 Danang Golf Club  
Tel: +84 511 395 8111  
www.dananggolfclub.com
- 2 Montgomerie Links  
Tel: +84 510 394 1942  
www.montgomerielinks.com
- 3 Laguna Lang Co Golf Club  
Tel: +84 54 369 5881  
www.lagunalangco.com

new international airport from Kuala Lumpur and Singapore-based Silkair has services from Singapore via Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Now, the IAGTO award, made at the organisation's annual convention – in Portugal – in November, provides another fillip to the Central Coast as a golf destination.

"Our aim is to ensure the world knows about the wonderful golf and general-interest tourism attractions on Vietnam's central coast," says Montgomerie Links' general director, Jon Tomlinson.

"We all believe implicitly in the region's tourism future. We know that when people see what is here, they will want to come back time and again, and golf is already a major attraction."

"Vietnam was once a hidden charm for tourists, but it is proving to be a formidable foe for countries such as Thailand and Malaysia, especially for golf," says Danang Golf Club's general manager, Ben Styles.

"With world-class golf courses on the Central Coast in Laguna Lang Co, Montgomerie Links and Danang Golf Club, Vietnam is quickly becoming recognised as a 'must visit' golfing destination. Anyone who comes and tries these amazing golf courses won't be disappointed."

"This award comes at a perfect time for the country and the Central Coast," says the golf director of Laguna Lang Co, Tim Haddon. "The focus of international golf travellers will inevitably turn to this area and people will see for themselves what a truly wonderful golf experience we offer." ■

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