

Sport for Elites: Asian Golf Resorts

A mix of extravagant affluence and absolute poverty, Asia may be the most diverse continent culturally but its booming golf industry lacks the sort of quality and range that exists in stronger regions like Europe and North America. Generally speaking the game is still an elitist pursuit here, confined to poor destinations that cater to wealthy travelers or prosperous regions whose affluent golfers pay excessive fees for their pastime. There is little municipal or affordable golf anywhere in Asia, the established clubs tend to be expensive institutions with little regard for the aspiring golfer and modern development is largely confined to luxury resorts and lavish country clubs.



In terms of participation, golf's growth has been most pronounced in South Korea, where the success of tournament professionals abroad has led to a massive rise in the interest in the game. Unlike Japan, however, the domestic marketplace cannot support its two and half million golfers and many of the South East Asian resorts in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, built initially to cater for the traveling Japanese, are now focusing on the thriving Korean market. Despite most of its mountainous mainland being unsuitable for golf and the small southern island of Jeju almost at saturation point, the Korean government is determined to more than double the country's two hundred courses by 2015. A rapid increase in wealth, together with inexpensive labor costs, has also led to huge growth in China with golf now part of some superb resort destinations, but unfortunately still inaccessible for the masses.



Asian golfers are generally very brand conscious and it is no surprise that clubs able to buy championship pedigree or afford to pay the exorbitant appearance fees of big name professionals have the highest profiles. Most local golfers are more interested in a course built by Nicklaus or played by Tiger than one lauded in a professional book. For the discerning visitor therefore, seeking out the region's celebrity layouts is generally a misguided practice. Some tour stops like the Bukit Course at Singapore Island Country Club, Fanling in Hong Kong, Nine Bridges, the World Cup Course at Mission Hills and Beijing's Pine Valley are worth visiting, but most are largely forgettable. The likes of Spring City and Tiger Beach in China, Nicklaus' Legends Course in Malaysia, Pinx and Blackstone on Jeju Island, Nirwana Bali, Ria Bintan and Bill Coore's Klub Rimba Irian in Indonesia among the few unlikely Asian gems.



The traditional western concept of a day's golf is largely foreign in many parts of Asia, players can take up to three caddies, rounds can last half a day and the experience is as much about the culinary delights of the clubhouse as the quality of the golf holes. Although the market doesn't appreciate good design and the steamy sauna-like climate is unsuited to the growing of decent golf grasses, there are some great sites here and the sumptuous resort facilities, friendly locals and few genuine standouts featured in the following pages are all worth celebrating.

Virtual golf craze sweeps South Korea

Rather than waiting to play rounds at one of the growing numbers of golf courses in the country, South Koreans are taking to the sport's virtual version. According to Business Week, 300,000 South Koreans regularly play at special cafes dedicated to the pastime. Kim Wonil, chief operating officer of Golfzon, told the publication that there are as many as 12,000 simulators populating some 3,000 'screen golf cafes'. Business Week's Moon Ihlwan attempted to explain the trend: "It's easy to understand why the demand is so great: Korea is a very expensive place to play golf the old-fashioned way. It costs about \$300 per person to play around, tee times are hard to secure, and joining a country club could burn a \$500,000 hole in your wallet." Typical food and refreshments served in a screen golf cafe are fried chicken and beer.

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