

VOYAGE



Golf A Delectable Asian Treat

Golf has emerged as one of the go-to activities during the Canada's warm months. Combining the great outdoors, some social bonding and a pace that is more civilized than today's speed demon thrill seekers, golf is a life-pastime that keeps hooking us like many a catch-and-release fish. The emergence of the golf resort has been a real phenomenon over the last 20 years and with that comes the inevitable competition to see just where the most far flung places can be built.

As the philosopher Kevin Costner said in the movie *Field of Dreams*, "If we build it, they will come."

No truer words, when it comes to golf. If someone blasted out 18 holes in the middle of the Siberian tundra, someone else would be out there at 8am with their Callaways looking for the snack cart on #4.

World golf has evolved into an absolutely huge business and combined with the allure of visiting an exotic port of call, has turned the grand old Scottish game into a great excuse to experience some wonderful world adventures.

An area that doesn't get a lot of buzz here, but one

that is really turning the heads who have experienced it, is southeast Asia.

Thailand is a land boasting an incredible climate and wide variances in cultural uniqueness. Royalty rules here and the Elephant is not far behind. It is a place of mysticism and also a place of unabashedly aggressive business and gaudy tourist traps. There are crowded urban pockets of smoke-choked Bangkok frenzy, while there are a myriad of lonely green-thatched islands peacefully shooing away civilization. In between, we find the development of golf, which has borrowed from western influence to create a uniquely Asian experience. Did we mention that Tiger Woods is the most notable golfer of Thai descent?

Although the north of the country has taken up the golf battle cry like everyone else, the number of choices to swing the sticks is a bit more limited there. The real action takes place a 25 minute flight south of Bangkok, particularly in an area called Hua Hin. Located right on the Gulf of Thailand, Hua Hin is one of those sunny tropical paradises that often come knocking on the insides of our heads on those cold December nights.

There are two very special places here that any golfer would trade in their lucky putter for. The first is the Dusit Resort, a place where Calgary golfers coming here for years through Incredible Journeys Travel. Their testimonials bear ample evidence of its magic.

The Dusit lies just north of town and is a sprawling 5-star resort right on the sea. Midst swaying palm trees, white sandy beaches and a number of authentically themed restaurants, it is certainly a great place for kicking those office gremlins out of your mind. Two monster swimming pools are there for the splashing and there is probably no better way of ending a round than with an authentic Thai massage!

Be sure to golf early in the day. Once the Asian sun decides to rule in the afternoon, it's best to retreat to cooler locales.

The other resort of choice is Chiva Som, which is also a 5-star property, though it is better known as a luxury health resort. In most of the spa world, this one ranks at or near the top, too. Specialists from all over the planet gather here to provide a repast for the soul and Chiva's unique architecture provides a perfect backdrop to the soothing salty waters.

Golf in the area is dominated by a number of terrific

courses. The Royal Hua Hin and Palm Hills provide scintillating backdrops that waver between the Petchaburi mountain range and the Gulf of Thailand. Another of the great courses here is the Springfield Royal Country Club, which is a Jack Nicklaus designed track that has been around since 1993. It is one tough par 72 nut to crack and makes one earn that yummy massage afterwards. Majestic Creek is also a formidable course in this area that features a 770 yard behemoth you need to pack a lunch for.

All told, there are at least 250 rated golf courses in Thailand that are well worth checking into. Bangkok, being the hub has its fair share of private and public offerings and anywhere there is a sunny shoreline or a picturesque mountain range, one is sure to find an accompanying golf oasis. Many of the courses in Thailand have taken root only over the past ten years and a person can never underestimate the power that a local hero like Tiger Woods brings toward development of championship courses here!

Besides the golf, there are any number of incredible sights to see, whether they involve the Royal Palace in Bangkok, an endless circuit of temples and pagodas to explore, the fascinating north country with its hill tribes and river rafting or the indescribable beauty of south Thailand's islands and beaches.





ing Vietnam. Unlike Thailand, Vietnam hasn't had the same sort of head start in relation to developing their tourist industry. One thing you can undoubtedly say, though is that what they lack in experience, they make up for in enthusiasm and drive.

Vietnam itself is a bit of a feel good story. Elsewhere in Opulence we talk about Croatia rising from its war torn ashes to become a hot spot for vacationers. So too has Vietnam. An entire generation of people were wiped out as a result of the 60's and 70's conflicts and for a good many years Vietnam had to wait for the little kids of that era to grow up and assume their place as builders of the country. Today's population is very young with many under the age of 30. Their saviness about the world around them has put them in an enviable position to take the best of what other tourist regions have done and adapt them to a fresh new Vietnamese plan.

Golf is at the forefront too, as the world's love affair with greens and golf carts is just now beginning to beat a path to this eastern door. The south part of the country where Ho Chi Minh City lies, has always had western influences from the French and English to the Americans. Culturally, it wasn't such a big stretch to start planning out space for courses. The north started off a little slower in the ways of the divot, as a more

nese north. They certainly have played a great game of catch-up, though.

One thing that is very similar to Thailand, is the spiritual awareness and sheer beauty of the landscapes, both on land and in the water. Halong Bay, for example raises many an eyebrow, as limestone skyscrapers launch themselves out of the water in the form of hundreds of eerie islets. Hiking seven kilometers up a mountain to the Perfume Pagoda is also another lifetime memory notched in the old headstone.

For our money the best bets in our golf safari lie with Dalat Palace, the Tam Dao Golf Resort and the Ocean Dunes.

French architecture and culture run throughout Vietnamese society and the IMG managed Dalat Palace Golf Club epitomizes the influence. Set into the highlands, we'll find a lot of lakes and trees and moderate temperatures. The course itself is a gorgeous one with undulating fairways and the only bentgrass greens in this part of the world. Dalat itself is the honeymoon capital of Vietnam, so at any given time, one can probably see a doey-eyed couple all dressed up going for wedding photos. The place of choice to stay here is the stately Sofitel Dalat Palace, one of the classic old hotels that remain in Asia.



Like Dalat, the Tam Dao Golf Club is also an impressive IMG layout about 70 kilometers northwest of Hanoi. This course follows some striking natural terrain and the 10,000 square meter club house looks like something that was snatched out of Alberta's Waterton National Park. The surrounding area here is very mountainous and with rivers weaving everywhere and lonely temples standing guard, it makes for a surreal setting.

Back down in the central south, Phan Thiet is home to a number of fantastic courses, with the best being the Ocean Dunes Golf Club... one the premier golf courses in Vietnam. The area itself is another sense tickler with ocean vistas and sand dunes all playing lead roles in the landscape. The course itself is a Nick Faldo design that follows the natural curvature of the land and it helps to be from the prairies here as the wind tends to bully the weak of heart. The Victoria Phan Thiet Beach Resort & Spa is the place to stay in this area as guests have their own bungalows in a colourful Asian garden just a few steps from their own private beach.

Indeed, Vietnam has joined golf's big boys club.

One final thought here is to mention both Laos and Cambodia, where golf first opened up in 1996 and are just now starting to make a dent in Asian golf circles. If the growth of the sport in Vietnam is any measure, then these two countries may well be the next great secret golf spots in that part of the world!

Golf is a great enabler as it gives people of many languages equal opportunity to utter verbal threats to their equipment. It also, provides a common ground pretty much anywhere in the world to enjoy a universal outdoor pastime that involves exercise, sun and fresh air. The added bonus is that with so many places to haul out that driver, it has created a whole new set of excuses to see the world.

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