

Different strokes: Vietnam's golfing boom

Akhil Sharma

Discouraged under communism, the sport is now enjoying a surge of popularity

About 15 minutes from central Hanoi, at the spectacular and recently opened Long Bien Golf Course, a man stood hunched behind a palm tree, appearing to urinate. A media handler, a young woman, was showing me the course. I didn't want to be rude, so I pretended not to notice.

We continued moving forward in a golf cart. It was night. Like a number of courses in a country as hot as Vietnam, Long Bien gets lit after dark for night play – lit so brightly that there seems to be a private sun over the course. Then I saw another man hunched behind a palm tree, then a third. Were they all relieving themselves?

“No,” said my handler and gestured up the fairway, long and broad enough to land a jet. “He's been hit by golf balls before.”

Among the many oddities of golf in Vietnam is that members of a foursome rarely wait for the entire party to finish before moving forward. Typically, a golfer, as soon as he strikes the ball, darts for his bag of clubs and races off. This is why you see men cowering behind palm trees beside the fairway as their party, left behind them, keeps hitting.

Vietnam is a great place for golf during the northern hemisphere's winter. It has warm weather, plenty of sunshine, and world-class golf courses scattered through the country – the newest of which include one designed by Jack Nicklaus at the BRG Legend Hill Golf Resort, another by Greg Norman at the Bluffs Ho Tram Strip near Ho Chi Minh City, and, at Laguna Lang Co in the centre of the country, a course by Nick Faldo. For me, though, the primary pleasure of playing in Vietnam is that in a world that feels increasingly homogenised, Vietnam remains pretty weird.

I booked my trip through Remote Lands, a leading operator of luxury bespoke trips into Vietnam, and when I spoke to my travel planner there, he asked me how “Vietnamese” I wanted my experience to be. For example, would I be comfortable playing golf on a course that periodically had signs warning against snakes? I said this was a level of authenticity I would rather avoid.

My interest, I explained, was slightly more intellectual. It was based on how the Vietnamese relationship with the sport has changed dramatically of late, even though the first Vietnamese golf course opened in the hilly city of Dalat in 1930. Before Vietnam opened up to international commerce in the early 1990s, golf was frowned upon by the country's communist leaders and all but disappeared. With visiting foreign businessmen came a demand for the first new courses, but now the game's expansion is being driven by domestic as well as international enthusiasts.

There are now, finally, more regular Vietnamese golfers than foreign ones – about 10,000 versus 7,000 – and the number of courses is growing fast to meet demand. There are currently approximately 38 courses in the country, but another 65 are at some stage in the planning, development or construction process. I told Remote Lands that I wanted to try some of the new courses, but I was primarily interested in those on which a lot of Vietnamese play.

Long Bien is the most convenient course for a traveller to Hanoi and ideal for getting a sense of Vietnam. The best course near the city in purely objective terms, though, is the just-opened Legend Hill. It is about 40 minutes north-east of central Hanoi and is definitely worth the drive. The morning I went, the traffic was stop-and-go, and while I waited at traffic lights, I periodically heard voices coming from loudspeakers. There were several speakers at the lights and different voices were coming out of them and speaking over each other. It took a little while for me to realise that these were the infamous public announcement loudspeakers that can start early in the day and which, Vietnamese friends say, ruin their morning sleep. The announcements seemed primarily concerned about public hygiene. (The loudspeakers highlight one of the basic truths of travelling here: no matter what one is doing and how western one's activity, Vietnam is regularly reminding one of its presence.)

Legend Hill is a seriously sexy course. One sees it and gets weak in the knees. There are stretches of green that are rippled like wind pressing on water, and then there are portions where the land curves upwards almost the way a skateboard ramp does. The specialness of the course, though, is that it feels ruthlessly intelligent. It is built around a twin-green concept in which one can play two different greens on the same hole. This means that there is a tremendous variety to how the course can be played. Also, the greens and fairways and traps feel constructed and cunning and not especially kind.

When I arrived at the course, it was empty. There were labourers in conical hats packing sand in traps and then there was me and an employee of the company showing me the trickiness of the different types of grass. But there wasn't even the solitary clink of a lone other golfer.

Partly, this was because I was there on an August afternoon and only a madman would be playing at that time. Plus the course was empty because it had opened just a few weeks earlier. Still, if a new Jack Nicklaus course opened anywhere near a European city, it would probably be hard to get a tee time for at least a year. This is among the many benefits of playing in Vietnam; one can get on to a world-class golf course without planning weeks in advance.

Almost every traveller to Vietnam will pass through either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (called Saigon by most residents). Near Ho Chi Minh, the course I wanted to play was Tan Son Nhat, a course beside the city's international airport - aeroplanes pass close overhead every few minutes. The airport needs to expand but despite some controversy the course, owned by the army, doesn't appear to be going anywhere. Instead the airport looks more likely to move, at a cost of some \$16bn. When Remote Lands tried to get me an appointment to visit the course, they were told that I, as a journalist, was not welcome. Ordinary players are, of course, encouraged to visit.



Instead I went to the Long Thanh Golf Club, which is some 40 minutes east of the city centre. It has two 18-hole courses – the Lake and Hill courses – and, with about a thousand members, is one of the largest in Vietnam. Some players who visit Long Thanh complain about confusions over tee times and slowness of play and a slight lack of golf etiquette on the course. If this would cause an inordinate amount of frustration, it is probably better to go with the new and tremendously professional Bluffs Ho Tram Strip. But for those interested in experiencing Vietnam with its friction and idiosyncrasies, Long Thanh is ideal.

When I tried pulling up before the club house, there was a traffic jam of Range Rovers and BMWs, and the sidewalk was crowded with golf bags, almost all expensive brands such as Titleist and TaylorMade. (As in many countries where golf is just taking root, the sport is often conflated with a lifestyle and so even very inexperienced players tend to purchase expensive clubs.)

In the club's restaurant, sunny and crowded, there was the usual activity that one sees at country clubs: men exchanging business cards and making introductions. Also, at one or two tables, there were men playing cards. Gambling is another of the fundamental aspects of golf in Vietnam. One course manager told me that bets can range from \$1,000 a round to \$75,000. He also said that golf courses, to some extent, can act as open-air casinos.

Outside on the course, I loitered at several greens. It was a balmy sunny morning. The course was crowded and noisy, and every green had several caddies since nearly all courses, partly to keep traffic moving, require each golfer to take a caddy with him. Vietnamese caddies tend to not play regularly, and so are not especially useful in terms of offering advice. It was rare to see a player asking a caddy's opinion or a caddy offering a suggestion. One thing I did note about the caddies is how they discreetly looked away when the golfers settled bets and this was something they did often.

Though most of the players were men, many of the caddies at Long Thanh were women – female caddies are the norm in Vietnam. There are some courses, such as Montgomerie Links, near Danang, Vietnam's third-largest city and the entry point to the beach resorts in central Vietnam, that hire only women. Because of the reputation that some parts of South Asia have for sexual impropriety, I had originally been uncomfortable about this, the idea of female caddies reminding me of hostess bars. Then I actually saw how these women dressed, not just in the complete coverage needed against the sun, but with bizarre additions like carrying a stack of

towels on their head the way village women in India carry pots. These female caddies did not appear to be trying to look attractive for the male gaze. These women worked hard.

Ton Nu Dieu Hanh is a slender woman who works as a caddy at Montgomerie Links. Montgomerie is a long course – the 12th hole is 527 yards – and just playing it during a hot morning feels gruelling, let alone lugging golf bags in the heat. Designed by Colin Montgomerie, the links-style course opened in 2009 and is one of the best courses in the country and among the oldest in the Danang area.

Once I left the course, I sat in the clubhouse and drank a coffee and talked to Hanh. A basic fact of life in Vietnam is that wives and mothers – and not husbands and fathers – have a reputation for being the pillars of the Vietnamese family. I asked Hanh whether she thought men could ever make good caddies. “My job is hard work,” she answered, sounding very practical. “Men are lazy.”

I then asked her the question that bothers everyone who is surprised by golf in Vietnam – the idea of this western sport, associated with the elite, being played in a poor country that also happens to be communist. I asked her what she thought of Vietnamese men who were so obviously rich and who might not have come by their wealth honestly. “I don’t care,” she replied. “I just want to get paid.”

Akhil Sharma is the author of ‘Family Life’ (Faber), which won this year’s Folio Prize