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How China has become a golfer's paradise

Cori Brett, Special to The Chronicle
Sunday, June 7, 2009

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Call me a heretic, but I'd rather take a golf vacation to China than Scotland or Ireland any day. I'd head not for St. Andrews and the Old Course but for Shenzhen and Mission Hills Golf Club, with its 12 (!) golf courses.

IMAGES



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Mission Hills (no relation to the Palm Springs country club where LPGA winners jump into the lake) is like a city within a city, covering 4,500 acres, about five times the size of Central Park. Designated a "special economic zone" by the Chinese government in the late 1970s, Shenzhen is dense with high-tech companies, multistory shopping centers and factories that produce

everything from surfboards to golf clubs, much of it for export to the United States.

Mission Hills opened its first golf course in 1995, designed by Jack Nicklaus to host the World Cup, and had expanded to 12 by its 12th anniversary. The Guinness Book of World Records ranks Mission Hills as the largest golf club in the world.

The intimidating Olazabal Course, home of the Omega Mission Hills World Cup through 2018, runs through untouched jungle, steep mountains and deep ravines, with more than 160 bunkers. Yes, golfers know Jose Maria Olazabal is one of the game's great sand players, but did he really have to put 24 bunkers on the 15th hole? The narrow 18th fairway borders a large lake and is presided over by a huge white marble statue, some 90 feet high, of Guan Yin, goddess of mercy. I was ready to place an offering if it would help my game.

Clusters of foursomes are visible on near and far courses, the caddies' bright red uniforms and crisp white brimmed helmets in stark contrast to the green fairways. The caddie corps consists of close to 3,000 young women, who speak limited English but are fluent in golf-speak. Every golfer is assigned one. They drive carts, spot balls, rake bunkers, mark balls on the greens, read putts and can accurately club you after three holes. You want green tees, pink tees, long tees, short tees? SPF 10 or SPF 30? Sure.

Mission Hills' golf courses bear the first or last name of the famous players and golf architects who designed them, i.e. Annika, Duval, Leadbetter, Vijay, Els, Ozaki, Norman. Courses by Nick Faldo, Pete Dye, Olazabal and China's Zhang Lian Wei, plus Nicklaus' World Cup Course, complete the dozen. Schmidt-Curley Design (of Scottsdale, Ariz.) was the golf course architect on 10 of the 12 courses.

Why 12? It's an important number in China, symbolizing 12 years in the Chinese horoscope and the completion of a cycle.

The courses are generally in excellent condition - a cart-path-only restriction helps. Various warm weather grasses are used, similar to golf courses in the southeastern United States.

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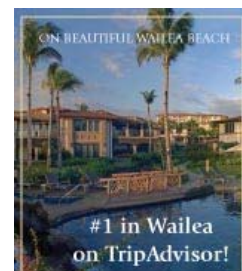
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Golfers set forth out of three clubhouses, the largest being Dongguan Clubhouse at 680,000 square feet. That's bigger than the average Costco, and it's the largest clubhouse in the world. Carts line up at staging areas under signs for the various courses, smiling caddies waiting alongside. Golfers have no excuse for arriving late to their tee times. The shuttle system that runs around the property is always on schedule.

Sore back, pulled a muscle, jet lag? The clubhouse spas will be your salvation. I was submerged in a candlenut milk bath, bundled into a fresh papaya body wrap and vigorously massaged by two therapists working in unison. That wasn't even the best part. At Dongguan Clubhouse, a softly lit tunnel lined in shimmering gold webbing led to the elegant Forest Springs Spa and to my favorite treatment, Foot Reflexology. It lasted two blissful hours and included Thai massage techniques of pulling and stretching. Facials and massages were mostly well under \$100.

The balmy evenings inspire participation in night golf. Thirty-six holes are equipped with floodlights. No glow-in-the-dark golf balls here; it's as brightly lit as a night baseball game at Boston's Fenway Park. Bright red hibiscus and clusters of pink bougainvillea flowers blossom all over Mission Hills. Rich tropical foliage flourishes in the humid climate.

Golf continues to thrive in China, while declining elsewhere. According to Mission Hills Executive Director Tenniel Chu, "20 years ago, China had some 100,000 golfers and no more than half a dozen courses. Today there are more than 300 courses and 3 million golfers in China, with the golfing population growing at a rate of up to 50 percent annually."

When Dr. David Chu founded Mission Hills, he anticipated the lifestyle demands of a growing affluent class and intended to establish China as the future center of golf. That probably seemed pretty far-fetched at the time. As Chu says about the 1995 World Cup, "Kids played in bunkers, people ran onto the fairways to take golf balls as souvenirs, and spectators wore dressy clothes and high heels." It was the first time many Chinese had ever seen golf.

Hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics catapulted China onto the center stage of global sports events, and now Mission Hills is an avid partner in the worldwide effort to get golf into the 2016 Olympics.

Mission Hills is both a country club, with more than 10,000 members, and a destination resort. Three golf academies serve all those golfers, including schools from world-renowned instructors David Leadbetter and Cindy Reid. She left her position as director of instruction at TPC Sawgrass after 17 years to set up her own teaching academy at Mission Hills, an impressive, 30,000-square-foot learning center with eight hitting bays and state-of-the-art technology. She describes her students as "so excited about this new sport of golf."

Reid's biggest challenge has been teaching golf through a translator.

If you go

Mission Hills is just an hour's drive outside of Hong Kong. Green fees start at about \$110 weekdays. Room rates depend on your choice of accommodations - \$182 to \$5,420 a night. Golf packages that include room, breakfast and a round of golf start around \$263 a night. 86 755 2802 0888 Ext. 33810, reservation@missionhillsgroup.com.

Remember, a U.S. citizen needs a visa to travel from Hong Kong into mainland China.

Cori Brett is a golf and travel writer living in Scottsdale, Ariz. E-mail comments about this story to travel@sfchronicle.com.

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This is absolutely no surprise. The Chinese love to gamble, and there is probably no other casual outdoor participant sport than golf for gambling.

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I'm not a golfer but have spent several years living and working in China. The worst problem is the extremely polluted air (plus the food and water you have to eat there are also extremely polluted). The crap "air" everyone is forced to breathe while in China does not make golfing attractive!

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