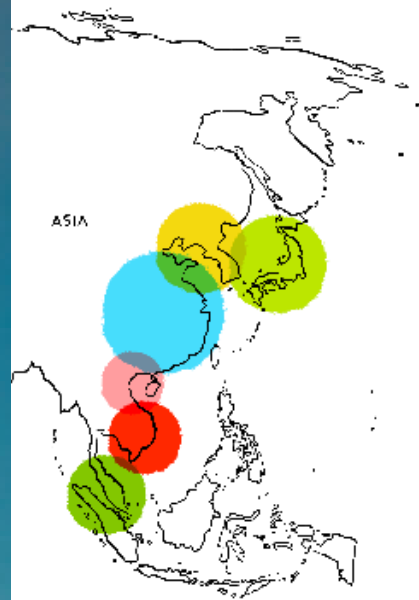


Good Morning, VIETNAM!

GOLF DAWNED IN ASIA
MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO,
BUT IF 'NAM CAME A LITTLE
LATE TO THE GAME, IT'S NOW
RISING AND SHINING. **BY JOSH SENS**





In

another setting, an SUV emblazoned with giant flaming golf balls might not cause a stir. But on the honeycombed streets of Hanoi, swarmed by motorbikes and rickshaws, and shadowed by ornate imperial pagodas, it stands out like a pushcart at a NASCAR race.

Perched at the wheel of his Toyota Fortuna, Duc Pham navigates the morning frenzy, rounding a rotary and ripping through an intersection without slowing, red lights in this city being mostly just for show. A traffic cop, his head on a swivel, tracks Pham's ride as it passes. A cluster of school children, crowded on a corner, flash thumbs up and shout in Vietnamese. "They're basically saying, 'Hey, that's cool, man!'" Pham explains, translating their reaction to his car's airbrushed side panels. "But

Laguna Golf Lăng Cô, a championship course designed by Sir Nick Faldo, hugs the country's central coast and epitomizes Vietnam golf's earthy exoticism.

I'm not sure they know what a golf ball is."

When he was their age, Pham, now 31, didn't have a clue. That was in the early '90s, and golf around Hanoi wasn't even yet a novelty; it was nonexistent. Pham's chosen sports were two national favorites: soccer and *da cau*, a variant of badminton played with one's feet.

In 1997, though, a game with a broad and deepening grip elsewhere in Asia finally got a foothold in Pham's part of the world. It happened with the opening of Kings Island, on a lake-wrapped peninsula 30 miles west of

the capital, Hanoi. It was the first golf course in northern Vietnam. Pham's father, a government official, got invited to an outing, and he brought along his then 11-year-old son. "I remember my first practice shot going high and straight, and the guys there telling my father, 'Your boy is a natural!'" Pham says. "I was really proud."

He was also hooked.

After high school, Pham, an unreformed golf junkie in a region with few outlets to indulge his fix, embarked for Brisbane, Australia, the better to immerse himself in the game. He returned

home eight years later, armed with impeccable Aussie-inflected English and membership in the PGA of Australia, making him the first—and still the only—Vietnamese citizen to earn those stripes. In the years since, having parlayed his credentials into two successful golf academies and retail shops in Hanoi, as well as his own golf instruction show on Vietnamese TV, Pham has emerged as a leading figure in a fast-growing market and as something of an emblem of today's Vietnam—a communist country where capitalism is alive and well. As is its favorite leisure sport.

Over the past decade, in the distant wake of golf's arrival in Japan and its more recent wildfire spread in Korea and China, a burgeoning monied class has given rise to a swelling population of Vietnamese golfers and triggered a starburst of course construction. Layouts by the marquee likes of Greg Norman

LAYOUTS BY THE LIKES OF NORMAN AND NICKLAUS NOW STRETCH FROM HO CHI MINH CITY TO THE BORDER OF CHINA.



Previous spread: Justin Mott; all other photos by Christopher Wise; all maps by Michael Mullan.



A SLICE OF SOUTH KOREA

In this small, mountainous, golf-mad country, prime golf-course land is a highly prized commodity. And nowhere is there a greater concentration of it than on Jeju Island, a popular holiday destination with a balmy year-round climate, a bounty of natural beauty and a handful of courses well worth seeking out for some distinctly Jeju juju.

and Jack Nicklaus now stretch from Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in the south to Vietnam's northern border with China, where noted architect Brian Curley has carved a stunner that overlooks the postcard-worthy rock outcrops of Ha Long Bay.

Across the country, locales whose names might resonate for other reasons have been transformed into busy redoubts for the game. In the village of Lăng Cô, near the Hai Van Pass, site of some of the fiercest fighting of the Vietnam War, a cool Nick Faldo course—an amenity for two luxury hotels—now spreads between the mountains and the sea, its rice-paddy hazards grazed by water buffalo. In and around Da Nang, once a central base of American military operations, R&R today includes the option of a round at one of four courses, among them designs by Norman, Nicklaus and Colin Montgomerie, whose layout, Montgomerie Links, is dotted at its edge by a weathered machine-gun pillbox. A fifth nearby course, slated to open this summer, also winds around a wartime relic—a concrete bunker. But the most distinctive traits of Robert Trent Jones Jr.'s layout-in-the-making are the artful rumples of a first-rate seaside track.

“Setting foot on it is a bit of a time warp,” Jones Jr. says. “The land has a rich history, which we’ve aimed to preserve. It also happens to be ideal for golf.”

Vietnam has a bounty of such sites, thanks in no small part to a sandy shoreline that extends for more miles than the entire West Coast of the United States. That factor alone

THE CLUB AT NINE BRIDGES

\$100 million of Samsung money reportedly went into the construction of this exclusive club, which hosts the CJ Cup, the first PGA Tour event ever staged in South Korea. Justin Thomas won the inaugural edition, in 2017, and Brooks Koepka snatched the title the following year.

BLACKSTONE GOLF & RESORT

Cut through rolling, rocky terrain, this 27-hole facility offers pristinely manicured golf in a tranquil, foothills setting. Two of the three nines (the East and South) are open to members and their guests only. But the North avails itself to public play.

PINX GOLF CLUB

Water, water, everywhere, not only in the views of the nearby coastline but also on the course, a plush layout rife with man-made creeks and lakes. Even by lavish Korean clubhouse standards, the après-golf facility here stands out, as does the property's luxury hotel.

LOTTE SKYHILL COUNTRY CLUB

A serene parkland setting provides the backdrop for two stoutly challenging courses by Robert Trent Jones Jr., where minefields of bunkers and myriad water hazards can be either fun or frustration, depending on the state of both your game and mind.

gives Vietnam an edge in the race toward the golf future over such space-pinched countries as South Korea and Japan. Balmy year-round temperatures are also an advantage. The political climate is accommodating, too. In contrast to China, where the government's anti-corruption campaign has put the kibosh on new course construction, Vietnam's ruling party has proclaimed its goal of pumping up supply. A plan put forth by the prime minister's office calls for the completion of 89 new courses by 2020, nearly double the number that exist today.

Financial muscle for such projects used to come mostly from overseas, but like so much else in Vietnamese golf, it's begun to skew domestic. Take the evolution of Kings Island, where Duc Pham first swung a club. The property, which visitors access by driving to a dock an hour west of Hanoi then hopping

onto a motorboat across a lake, was originally developed in 1997 by a Thai businessman. Less than two years later, it was snatched up by Nguyen Thi Nga, a feisty sixtysomething with close-cropped hair, a taste for floral-patterned dresses and a net worth that reportedly makes her one of the wealthiest women in Vietnam.

As the chairwoman of BRG Group, a conglomerate that deals in banking, real estate and retail chains, among other holdings,



LEFT: The Lake Course at Sky Lake Resort in Hanoi, opened in 2012, has ample greenery—and teeth. RIGHT: Duc Pham, Vietnam's only PGA professional, likes his ride—and his roadside cuisine—extra spicy.



JAPAN 101

Over the last century, the Land of the Rising Sun has built more golf courses than the rest of Asia combined. Here's a timeline of notable developments in Japanese golf, beginning with the country's introduction to the game.

1901: It's not a full 18, but it satisfies the needs of Arthur Hesketh Groom, the British expat who builds a four-hole loop as a private playground, which expands two years later into a nine-hole layout. Behold Kobe Golf Club, the first course in Japan.

1913: Growing domestic interest in the game gives rise to the Tokyo Golf Club, the first golf club in the country established by and for Japanese golfers.

1940: During World War II, a number of the country's courses are requisitioned by the Japanese military. After the Allied victory, many of these same courses are seized by U.S. forces.

1942: Future Golf Hall of Fame inductee Isao Aoki is born.

1950-60: As Japanese courses return to Japanese control, the game enjoys a surge. Along with new courses, an on-course highlight: the 1957 win by Nakamura Torakichi in the Canada Cup, an event now known as the World Cup.

1973: The Japan Golf Tour is established.

1980s: A booming Japanese economy, combined with the passage of a law relaxing land-use restrictions, triggers more course construction. By decade's end, there are more than 1,000 courses across the country.

1989: Masashi Ozaka, aka "Jumbo," begins a run of 200 consecutive weeks in the top 10 of the OWGR.

1990: Minoru Isutani, a controversial Japanese businessman, purchases Pebble Beach for an estimated \$850 million, only to sell it two years later to another Japanese outfit for a reported \$500 million.

1992: Hideki Matsuyama is born.

2016: Tom and Logan Fazio complete renovations of the East Course at Kasumigaseki, host venue for the 2020 Olympics

2017: Matsuyama rises to number two in the OWGR, the highest position ever for a Japanese golfer.

2018: Bowing to pressure, all-male Kasumigaseki admits its first female members.



Madame Nga is afforded a professional respect that verges on reverence, and her lofty status, in a business culture layered with ritual-like formalities, turns interviews with her into grand affairs, wrapped in the trappings of a United Nations session.

On this hazy afternoon in the capital, she is camped in a lounge chair in a boardroom of a BRG-owned bank, ringed by an entourage. A videographer films. A stenographer scribbles. An attendant pours tea. Madame Nga wears an earpiece to follow the whispers of a translator who sits only a few feet away. The chairwoman smiles as she speaks, and punctuates her words with elaborate hand gestures.

At the outset, she says, she wasn't drawn to golf for golf itself. Her introduction to the game came at a corporate event nearly 20 years ago. She didn't play that day, but two things struck her: the emerald beauty of the landscape, and

the preponderance of boardroom bigwigs.

"From my perspective, it was quite clear," she says. "Golf was a good business opportunity."

Still, you know the story: a few flushed shots, and a devotee was born. Madame Nga's fondness for the game has since grown so intense that it's become the source of a family joke, her children having given her handwritten signs to hang by her bed that read, "Golf is my love. Golf is my life."

She plays as often as her stacked schedule allows, usually on weekends, frequently on courses that she owns. There is no shortage of them. Soon after purchasing Kings Island,

ABOVE: At Kings Island, the caddies—usually female, unusually cheerful, and always encouraging—almost upstage the Golden Bear's grandly flowing design. **RIGHT:** The 15th on architect Brian Curley's sublime "Course A" track, in Dong Hoi, runs up against the South China Sea—and has the sand to show for it.



The New Norman

Greg Norman wears many hats, and not just ones with shark logos. Witness his new role as official tourism ambassador for Vietnam. His appointment reflects how seriously Vietnam takes golf, and also how seriously Norman takes Vietnam. With three courses to his name in the country—including heralded Ho Tram Bluffs, an Asian Tour host site, and KN Golf Links, a 27-hole facility etched through dunes along the southeast coast—and a slew of other projects underway, Norman sees great promise for the Vietnamese market.

Ambassador Norman? How'd that come about?
The catalyst was what the government saw in the quality of our courses and in the potential for golf to promote tourism and growth. I've been in golf for more than 40 years. I've seen what it's contributed in Dubai, Mexico, Oman, Sweden. When the Vietnamese asked me to help, I was honored.

What drew you there in the first place?
The people. The food. And of course the natural beauty. There's also an incredible openness here. Even though they're a communist country, they're very open to free-market capitalism. I was deeply impressed by that.

Golf is still in its infancy in Vietnam. Is it fair to say that that's where it was in China 20 years ago?
Yes, but in China everybody was just throwing stuff out there without a sustainable approach, which is what also happened in the United States when we were building 400 courses a year. That's not sustainable, and it's something I've emphasized to the Vietnamese government. Let's make this a multi-generational opportunity.

What kind of courses will new generations see?
I can tell you that we have five courses in construction and 21 in the pipeline. The site we're hoping to start on next year has sand dunes that dwarf anything you've seen and would dwarf anything I've done in golf. The coastline here is unbelievable. But I'm also looking at an area called Sapa, in the northwest. Vietnam has spectacular mountains and river systems to tap into as well. The diversity for golf architecture is just massive.

Madame Nga added a second course on the grounds. Just this past year, she cut the ribbon on a third, the Kings Course, a rolling layout that takes ample advantage of its lakeside terrain, building toward a rousing finish and a par-3 19th hole with an island green—a memorable stage for settling bets.

Designed by Jack Nicklaus II, the Kings Course is part of a larger deal between BRG and the Nicklaus group that has already yielded three courses around the country and calls for the completion of another five by 2020. At Madame Nga's insistence, each development boasts a signature feature. At the Kings Course, that role is filled by the island-green 19th. At Legend Hill, another of her Golden Bear-designed Hanoi-area courses, each of the 18 holes has two distinct green complexes, on which play alternates from one day to the next. Such projects result from interplay between architect and owner that can be enlightening for both sides.

"As an architect, I'm always focused first on good golf course strategy," says Nicklaus II. "But what I've learned is that as important as strategy is, Madame [Nga] puts more emphasis on beauty and difficulty. And the truth is that those

things aren't mutually exclusive. I can accomplish good strategy but also make a golf course that's beautiful and tough."

DURING GOLF'S embryonic stages in Vietnam, course aesthetics tended toward the lush and garden-like, much as they have throughout Asia, replete with waterfalls and forced carries. That's still the dominant taste. But a minimalist movement has taken root. One of several places where its seeds have sprouted is the city of Dong Hoi, an hour flight from Hanoi, along the country's northeast coast. Aside from its beaches—and a boardwalk brimming with street-food vendors and scented with the funky whiff of fish sauce—Dong Hoi merits guidebook mention for the Phong Nha caves, a labyrinth of subterranean passages that makes up the largest underground cavern system in the world.

But that's not what first caught Brian Curley's eye. A Monterey native with a laid-back, bemused California manner, Curley, 59, has seen golf through its infancy across large swaths of Asia. His credits on the continent include the Mission Hills projects, a pair of mega-golf developments in China. Curley turned his sights to Vietnam



Norman: Hunter Martin/Getty Images



NEAR WHAT ONCE WAS THE SITE OF
FIERCE FIGHTING IN THE VIETNAM WAR,
A FALDO COURSE SPREADS BETWEEN
THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SEA, ITS
HAZARDS GRAZED BY WATER BUFFALO.



On Laguna Lăng Cô, Sir Nick's second design in Vietnam, it is absolutely best to avoid the rough.

five years ago, as the Chinese government crackdown on course construction squelched the market there. What he saw in Dong Hoi was miles of unspoiled alabaster dunes, the stuff of architectural dreams.

Curley has since inked a contract with FLC, a Vietnamese real-estate concern, to build ten courses in Dong Hoi. That long-term task brings him to the area roughly once a month. On this sky-blue morning, he is standing on the brow of a deftly contoured green that backs up to the edge of a wind-swept beach. Blue water spreads behind him. White dunes rise on either side. Think *Streamsong* by the South China Sea.

This is the 15th hole of Curley's first completed Dong Hoi course. Another is seeded and set to open this summer. Both are so new that they're known generically as Course A and Course B, although Curley has proposed the names Forest Dunes and Ocean Dunes—inspired by their traits.

If their look and feel is relatively new for Vietnam, so is the style of play they welcome.

"I like courses that are find-your-ball hard," Curley says. From his beachside vantage point, his view takes in the broad sweep of Course A,

VIETNAM'S BRIGHTEST CLAIM TO FAME WAS SOLDIER NYUGEN "TIGER" PHONG, NAMESAKE OF EARL WOODS' FIRSTBORN SON.

which has ample fairways but not a single formal bunker, only firm, eye-catching sandy wastes. "But a lot of golfers here are gluttons for punishment and seem to think it's not golf if you don't lose a few sleeves along the way." He recalls an outing at another of his courses, in Quy Nhon, farther south along the coast, that drew some 300 golfers, all playing from the white tees. Over the course of three days, only four players broke 80. And yet, Curley says, "they all came away telling me that the course wasn't challenging enough."

As much as anything, Vietnam's scant percentage of skilled players underscores how swiftly its golf population has grown—to an estimated 30,000, a tenfold increase

from 20 years ago. Not bad when you consider that prior to the boom, the country's biggest claim to golf fame was not even a golfer but a Vietnamese soldier, Nyugen "Tiger" Phong, the wartime buddy of Earl Woods who became the namesake of Woods' firstborn son.

Two generations later, Tiger Phong is long dead and Tiger Woods has yet to play a round in Vietnam. The face of golf in the country is more prominently represented by Duc Pham, whose instructional show, *On Green*, airs on national TV with two to three new episodes per month.

Filming often takes Pham on the road. But today is a day off, and he's traveling for leisure, piloting his SUV through the heart of Hanoi toward the outskirts of the city, a set

CALL ME "MADAME" Legend Hill, the first of the Nicklaus-designed courses in Vietnam, features two greens on every hole and is owned by the colorful, commanding BRG chairwoman, Nguyen Thi Nga.





A LITTLE TROUBLE IN BIG CHINA

Golf has a complex history in China, where official pronouncements against the game have often overlapped with surges in play and prolific bursts of new course construction. While the government's latest anti-corruption crackdown has led to a slew of recent course closures, an estimated 600-plus layouts remain in operation around the country. Here are four of the best.

SPRING CITY RESORT MOUNTAIN

With mountains in the backdrop and picturesque lake views unfolding all around, this Jack Nicklaus design provides a multitude of aesthetic high points as it winds artfully over undulating ground.

SHANQIN BAY GOLF CLUB

Minimalist masters Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw made the most of a striking site, shaping a layout of understated beauty on bluffs that overlook the South China Sea.

MISSION HILLS HAIKOU LAVA FIELDS

True to its name, this Brian Curley design (part of a mega-golf development on Hainan Island) offers the striking contrast of a verdant layout, etched through a moody lunar landscape of black lava rock.

YANGTZE DUNES AT LANHAI INTERNATIONAL CC

In a country that favors lush and lavish designs, Geoff Ogilvy's Australian company went the opposite way, shaping a course that plays firm and fast and runs hard along the river for which it's named.

of clubs stuffed in his trunk. The route takes him onto quieter roads, where the broad-shouldered buildings of the capital fade in favor of rice paddies and the motorbikes give way to ox-drawn plows. A turnoff leads Pham through a sleepy village, the scenery passing as a slo-mo montage of noodle shops, farm stands and auto-parts retailers. And then, at the corner of a narrow crossing, looking like a misplaced extra in a grainy movie, an elderly woman, camped under a corrugated metal lean-to, is hawking used golf balls in vacuum-packs: the otherwise unmarked entrance to Sky Lake Resort & Golf Club.

Opened in 2012, the property has two courses, Sky and Lake, neither built by a name designer but both ripe with the straight-driving requirements that Pham enjoys. The scenery isn't shabby either, with lakes and verdant valleys, and craggy mountains in the distance shaped like broken teeth.

Moments later, Pham stands at the first tee of the Lake Course, shadowed by a caddie, loopers being ubiquitous at Vietnamese courses and also central to their charm. Predominantly young women who might otherwise be laboring in factories or fields, they go about their work with refreshing exuberance, openly celebrating good shots and lamenting poor ones—a marked contrast to the seen-it-all comportment of caddies elsewhere in the world.

In Pham, a scratch player, they have a lot to cheer.

The par 4 before him is a stout dogleg right that requires a hefty carry over wetlands. Pham settles on his line, then steps back to take in his surrounds. During the Vietnam War, fighting on the ground didn't make it this far north, but bombings did. Though too young to remember those years of conflict, Pham has heard stories of the devastation.

"It can be surreal, looking around, knowing the history and everything that happened," he says. "And then to realize, I'm playing golf, right here."

He waggles, swings.

"Oooh!" his caddie cries, and giggles.

Beneath his Titleist cap, Pham grins, the happy profile of a man who, not unlike his country, has taken a game from elsewhere and made it his own. ©

VROOM WITH A VIEW The Old Quarter in Hanoi screams with scooters and teems with energy. Golf is a force in 'Nam, but the country's force of nature is its magnificent culture and people.

