

# GREENING ASIA

Thailand's place at the forefront of golf tourism in Asia Pacific is being challenged by China

BY DALE LAWRENCE



(Above) Mission Hills employs some 7,000 staff, including 3,000 female caddies.

In 1985, a young golfer named Eldrick Woods, born to a Thai mother and a US serviceman father, played a round of golf at the exclusive Royal Bangkok Sports Club (RBSC). It's an event still fondly remembered by members of the RBSC, a club that enjoys a prime position in the heart of Bangkok close to major shopping malls, five-star hotels and Chulalongkorn University.

Some 84 years before Eldrick 'Tiger' Woods' prodigious talents drew gasps of astonishment from club members, King

Chulalongkorn signed the Royal Charter that established the RSCB in response to a request from members of the foreign business community.

In 1906, the RBSC opened Thailand's first golf course. Now, more than 100 years later, golf is big business in the Land of Smiles. And it's forecast to get even bigger.

Thailand has long been a favourite destination for golfers living in Japan and South Korea. The cooler months of the not so hot season (November to February)

normally see a significant rise in tourist arrivals from these two countries as golfers seek to combine the pleasant weather with the outstanding value offered by the country's 260 golf courses.

Indeed, some resort-style courses in Thailand (notably in Hua Hin and the vicinity of Khao Yai National Park) have been converted into golfing training camps where students from South Korea combine academic studies with intensive practice and loads of tuition.

**"The surge in golf tourism to Thailand will entrench the kingdom as by far Asia's most popular destination for foreign golfers and one of the top three other golf destinations behind market leader Spain"**

Mark Siegel, owner of Golfasian

Golfasian, one of the region's leading inbound specialist tour operators, organises golf packages in Thailand and neighbouring countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam. Company owner Mark Siegel says that the annual value of golf tourism to Thailand is climbing towards the magical US\$2 billion mark.

With golf tourists, according to Siegel, spending an average of US\$3,300 per head whilst in Thailand, Golfasian is forecasting that up to 600,000 of those visitors will be playing on some of the most popular courses in Bangkok, Phuket, Hua Hin, Pattaya and Chiang Mai over the next 12 months.

"It could be our best season ever," says Siegel. "The political situation is calm and Thailand's cultural capability to attract tourists remains streets ahead of other markets. The surge in golf tourism will entrench the kingdom as by far Asia's most popular



(Above) Mark Siegel, owner of Golfasian, says Thailand is the green heart of golf tourism in Asia Pacific. (Below) Mission Hills features 12 separate courses designed by legends like Greg Norman, who has also partnered with the sprawling resort on a development program designed to help Chinese golfers compete in the Rio de Janeiro Olympics of 2016. (Below right) Thailand is famous for its skillful and economical female caddies.

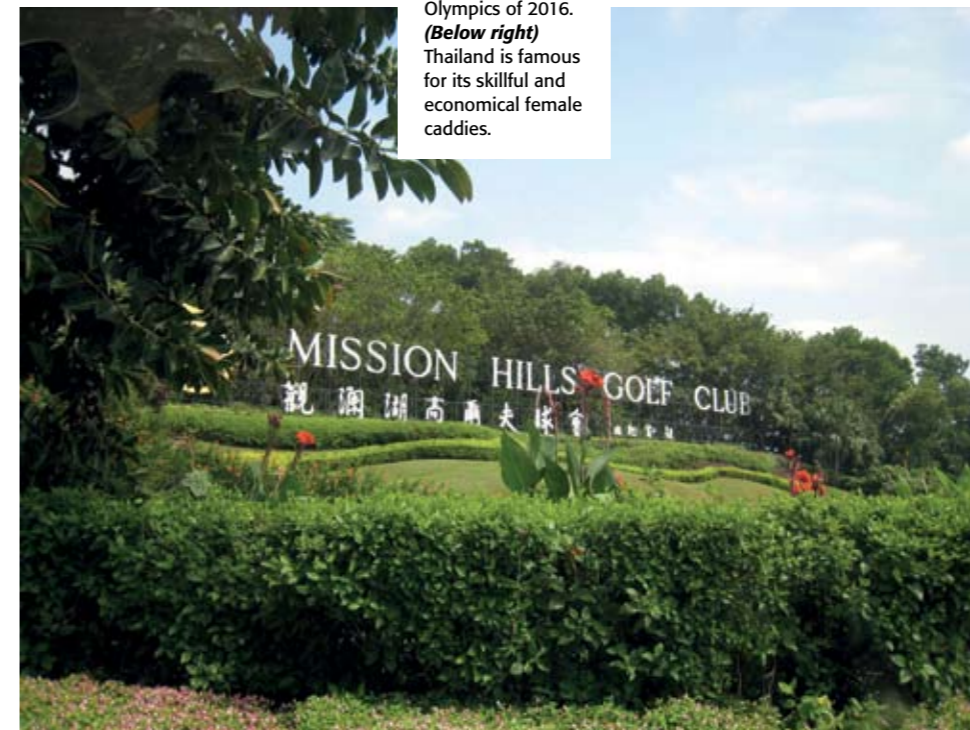
destination for foreign golfers and one of the top three other golf destinations behind market leader Spain which attracts almost a million golf tourists a year."

Siegel adds that the growth has been driven in part by growth from the traditional source markets of Australia and Europe. But there's an emerging market set to change the face of golf tourism at destinations across Southeast Asia.

## CHINESE LINKS

The explosion of the middle-class in China has sparked an interest in golf on an unprecedented scale. But the price of playing 18 holes on one of China's many new courses is way beyond the pockets of most homegrown golf enthusiasts. For the moment it remains an elitist sport.

Since the massive mainland is expected to become the world's largest tourism source market by 2015



## Latest Hits

The Dusit Thani hotel in downtown Bangkok has signed up pro golfer Thanyawat Somathat (Pro Jade) to head the hotel's new golf school. The Dusit Thani Golf Academy and driving range is for golfers of all ages and abilities. Veteran golfer Pro Jade has some 20 years of experience in teaching golf at all levels.

Golf's Asian Tour welcomes a new world-class tournament to Thailand. The Thailand Golf Championship at Amata Spring Country Club in December 2012 is set to attract an impressive list of golf champions and superstars including Rory McIlroy, Darren Clarke and Lee Westwood from the United Kingdom.

It's the tour's season-ending tournament where the battle for the coveted Order of Merit crown will be determined. The event takes place at Amata Spring Country Club from December 15.





**But the price of playing 18 holes on one of China's many new courses is way beyond the pockets of most homegrown golf enthusiasts**

there's every chance that the golf tour package market will capitalise on the growing interest in a sport once described by 19th century American humorist Mark Twain as "a good walk spoiled".

David Chu is a major influence in the emergence of golf in China. This business tycoon created the world's largest golf club – Missions

*(This page)* Yani Tseng, the 22-year-old phenomenon named Rolex Player of the Year in 2010, has given golf an even bigger Asian 'face'.

Hills – in Shenzhen. It features 12 separate courses designed by some of the world's top golfers, like Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman, Sir Nick Faldo and Chinese golfing superstar Zhang Liangwei. This massive golfing complex employs 7,000 staff, including 3,000 female caddies.

Chu's determination to ignite a passion for golf in China has not stopped in Shenzhen. He's now working on a new project on the island of Hainan close to the capital Haikou. By all reports, the company is investing in excess of US\$4 billion on a similar Mission Hills complex embracing 10 golf courses, and a 500-room hotel that opened in March 2012 and a water park. "In terms of scale and facilities, Mission Hills Haikou will be our biggest resort, bigger than Shenzhen," Chu told *Forbes Asia* magazine.

But if prices at Chu's new complex on Hainan island are in the same bracket as those charged in Shenzhen, these championship golf courses are way beyond the means of your average Chinese amateur golfer. That's where golf tour specialist operators such as Golfasian and World Splendour Holidays can play a key role in converting Chinese spectators into players by offering tempting packages to Thailand.

**THAI LINKS**

"South Korea and Japan are still our top source markets for golf tours in Thailand with Taiwan now in third place," explains Parichote Sukriket, Managing Director of Bangkok-based World Splendour Holidays. "But it is certainly possible that China will one day be the top source market. The

mainlanders are attracted to Thailand by the top quality golf courses, where they can play at very competitive prices, coupled with the excellent food and entertainment available throughout the country."

The popularity of golf in Taiwan has been boosted by the phenomenal success of world number one Yani Tseng. Born in Guishan and now a resident of Orlando, Florida, this young lady has set the golfing world alight with a string of victories on the LPGA and Ladies Asian Golf tours. At the tender age of just 22 she has become a role model for the island's golfers – and sparked even greater interest in the game amongst the population of this island.

Hosting golf tours in Thailand is now a year-round business for Parichote Sukriket and his team at World Splendour Holidays – and they are catering not only for golfers but also for non-playing spouses/partners as well. "We organise shopping trips, cooking classes and tours to the popular cultural attractions," he adds.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand recognises the value of golf tourism to the nation. TAT Governor Suraphon Svetasreni and Authority Chairman Vichai Srikanan recently led a delegation to Hawaii in a bid to tempt more golfers to choose Thailand.

"Hawaiians have previously mostly gone to the US mainland to play golf away from home, but Thailand is a big attraction," says Mark Siegel, who also has an important role as president of 'Golf in a Kingdom - The Thailand Golf Experience', a co-operative marketing programme comprising golf courses, hotels and resorts in Thailand's four major golf destinations of Bangkok,



**GOLF HISTORY**

Visitors to Thailand wishing to experience a something of the nation's golfing history should visit the old railway course in Hua Hin. Now known as the Royal Hua Hin, the course was designed by Scottish railway engineer A O Robins and opened in 1924. The entrance is adjacent to Hua Hin Railway Station and the Bangkok-Singapore line. The line was a driving force in establishing Hua Hin as a popular tourist destination in Thailand for Thais and foreign residents.



*(Right)* Banyan Golf Club's General Manager Stacey Walton (right), handing out awards at the annual Banyan Masters Tournament in 2010. *(Below)* Tiger Woods wins again.

Phuket, Pattaya and Chiang Mai.

The delegation's visit to Hawaii was organised by businessman and Oahu Country Club member, Randy Ho. The club hosted two tournaments for the visitors and local players and the delegation provided some 130 travel agents and tour operators with an insight into the many attractions of playing golf in Thailand. Mark Siegel adds, "The quality of the courses, food, entertainment and value for money make Thailand unique. A seven-night package with four rounds of golf is about half the price of most other golf destinations."

It's a formula that may yet be applied in China.

Price is not the determining factor for China's elite. With the rich list growing ever longer and luxury car makers struggling to keep up with demand in the major cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, China's new breed of private sector wealth creators are turning to golf in a big way – and that's good news for the hotel members of the Thailand's 'Golf in a Kingdom' programme such as the St Regis Bangkok.

St Regis General Manager Andreas Oberoi has announced special rates for guests to play at five top courses close to the city, including the exclusive Thai Country Club and Muang Kaew – a favourite of golf tour boss Parichote Sukriket.

"Golf is an up-market sport in Asia and we want to attract groups, individual golfers and couples who play the sport," explains Oberoi. "Increasingly, people are travelling to play golf. Their stays tend to be longer and they spend more. It is an attractive niche market segment." Members of this innovation cooperative venture are predicting a bumper high season and consistently strong demand throughout 2012.

Siam Country Club, near Pattaya, is a popular and demanding two-course complex that relies solely upon pay-as-you-play visitors.



**TIGER TALE**

Tiger Woods' visits to the homeland of his mother Kultida have become all too rare. His last public visit was in November 2010 to compete in a one-day charity tournament with fellow professionals Paul Casey, Camilo Villegas and local golfing hero Thongchai Jaidee at the Amata Springs Country Club in Chonburi, near Bangkok.

The event raised significant sums for charitable projects overseen by Thailand's reigning monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Managing Director Prasertchai Phornprapha is expecting to host up to 50,000 international visitors in 2012. "There has been a dramatic improvement," he says. "When there is peace in Thailand it is the destination of choice because of its culture and value for money."

Thai Country Club, named by Asian Golf Monthly in 2010 as Thailand's best course, is also expecting a bumper season. General Manager TW Hughes says his optimism stems from one of the best high seasons ever. "We believe this year (2011/12) will be at least equal to last year and perhaps even better, given that those who experienced our course are likely to want to repeat their experience. The course will be in the best condition in years."

In Hua Hin, Banyan Golf Club General Manager Stacey Walton is confident of better times ahead for Thailand's golf sector, and he's full of praise for the work undertaken by the TAT. "The Tourism Authority of Thailand has done a good job in rebuilding Thailand's image and we should see some promising results from that. November to February is looking especially strong and, as the golf hub of Asia, Thailand will reap the benefits."

Tourism in Thailand has reached yet another crossroads. The new Thai government is targeting some 30 million international visitors by 2015 in a policy predictably driven by a desire for numerical year-on-year increases. Thailand's private sector, in particular the four- and five-star hotels as well as the golf course owners, are demanding greater numbers of higher spending tourists. The desire of wealthy travellers in China to experience the delights of golf courses overseas may yet satisfy that demand.

It was English poet William Wordsworth who once said, "Golf is a day spent in a round of strenuous idleness". Where better to be strenuously idle than in Thailand.