Back on West Coast, Robin Nelson still designing in the Pacific

MILL VALLEY, Calif. — Robin Nelson is one of those fortunate souls who knew his destiny almost from the start. A golfer from age 10, he was only 14 when he visited Spyglass Hill Golf Course, in Pebble Beach, Calif. It was 1965. The famous layout was still under construction, and Nelson had an epiphany.

"I walked out there on a cleared fairway," he says, "and it was like the clouds parted and God said, 'This is what you will do for the rest of your life.'"

At the University of California at Berkeley, class of ’73, Nelson designed his own program, he says, "all geared at becoming a golf course architect." A native of the San Francisco Bay area, he remained in California after graduation, working for Bob Gravas and, later, Ron Fream.

In 1982 he pulled up stakes and moved to Honolulu. Over the next 17 years he designed 10 courses in Hawaii and numerous others throughout the Pacific — Indonesia, Australia, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand. He and partner Neil Haworth eventually opened a branch office in Singapore. All told, Nelson has more than 100 new or remodeled courses to his name, in 21 countries on six continents.

For family reasons — mainly his children’s schooling — Nelson moved back to the Bay area in 1999, setting up shop in Mill Valley. "For golf course architects, it doesn’t matter where you live," he says. "It’s not like you’re going to build a course down the street. You have to travel. And I haven’t abandoned my overseas work. I still have quite a few things going on in Hawaii."

Today, Nelson is one of the industry’s hottest architects. He was recently named one of the hottest architects. He was recently named one of the industry’s hottest architects. Nelson:

"We’ve gone through a transformation recently. I decided I wanted to get small. I used to have five designers, but I ended up being less a designer than an overseer of what everybody else was doing. I like being involved from the first phone call to the opening day — every single decision, every single line on a paper, every single stick of a clod of dirt. So actually I’ll be doing less work, but I’ll be more involved with it."

GCN: What’s the difference between designing courses in Asia versus the States?

RN: The U.S. developer is a lot more sophisticated. The priorities in Asia are different. A lot of times you run into a developer who’s just interested in having an image more than the final result. They are primarily interested in having a big-name architect, whereas in the United States they really care about the golf course, the environment, and what golfers will think and if they will come back.

In the United States, of course, it’s a business, but people realize it’s all-encompassing, where it’s the environment, and reputation, ease of maintenance, and so on. So they will seek out an architect who specifically has done these things, instead of just a big name.

GCN: You’ve designed some courses in China. Do you have anything in the pipeline there?

Nelson: We’ve done five courses in China and have three under construction. One of the most fascinating is a project up in the mountains, in the leg-

Tropical-themed Bali Hai course debuts on Vegas Strip

LAS VEGAS, Nev. — A desert strip that features the Eiffel Tower, the Great Pyramids and the Manhattan skyline now also boasts a golf course that evokes the idyllic isles of the South Pacific.

Bali Hai Golf Club, a tropical-themed layout, opened here on the famed Las Vegas Strip recently. And in a twist from the saying about the month of March, this course comes in like a lamb and goes out like a lion — the drama and challenge build as you go.

Designed by Lee Schmidt and Brian Curley, Bali Hai is a 7,015-yard, par-72 track that sprawls over 145 acres, adjacent to the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino. Developer Bill Walters, chairman of Walters Golf, didn’t scrimp on the landscaping. The course is spectacularly planted, with 100,000 tropical flowers and 4,000 trees, including 2,500