

An Adventure in Life

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This month I will attempt to answer some of the more common questions that I have received via e-mail and also from friends during a recent vacation to Wisconsin. The questions are both golf course related and in some cases about life in Hong Kong and China.

How long does it take to get to Hong Kong?

Some airlines have non-stop direct flights from Chicago to Hong Kong. These flights generally take about 14 hours of flight time. The route is north to the Arctic Circle, down over Siberia, Russia, and Red China into Hong Kong. Some airlines have a route that goes from Hong Kong into Tokyo; change of aircraft for a flight from Tokyo to either Detroit or the Twin Cities, and then to any regional airport. This second option will generally take about 20 to 22 hours depending on connection times and the particular airline. The one positive for the direct flight is not worrying about making connecting flights. One needs to allow a minimum of 1 hour for connecting flights as the arrival gate and the next departure may be quite a distance apart. During the flight, the view of the earth's surface over the Arctic Circle and Siberia is great. The time in the air has never presented a real problem for me, I actually enjoy the travel. The time actually seems to pass very quickly. One can really understand and realize how small the world has really become through air travel and the computer age.

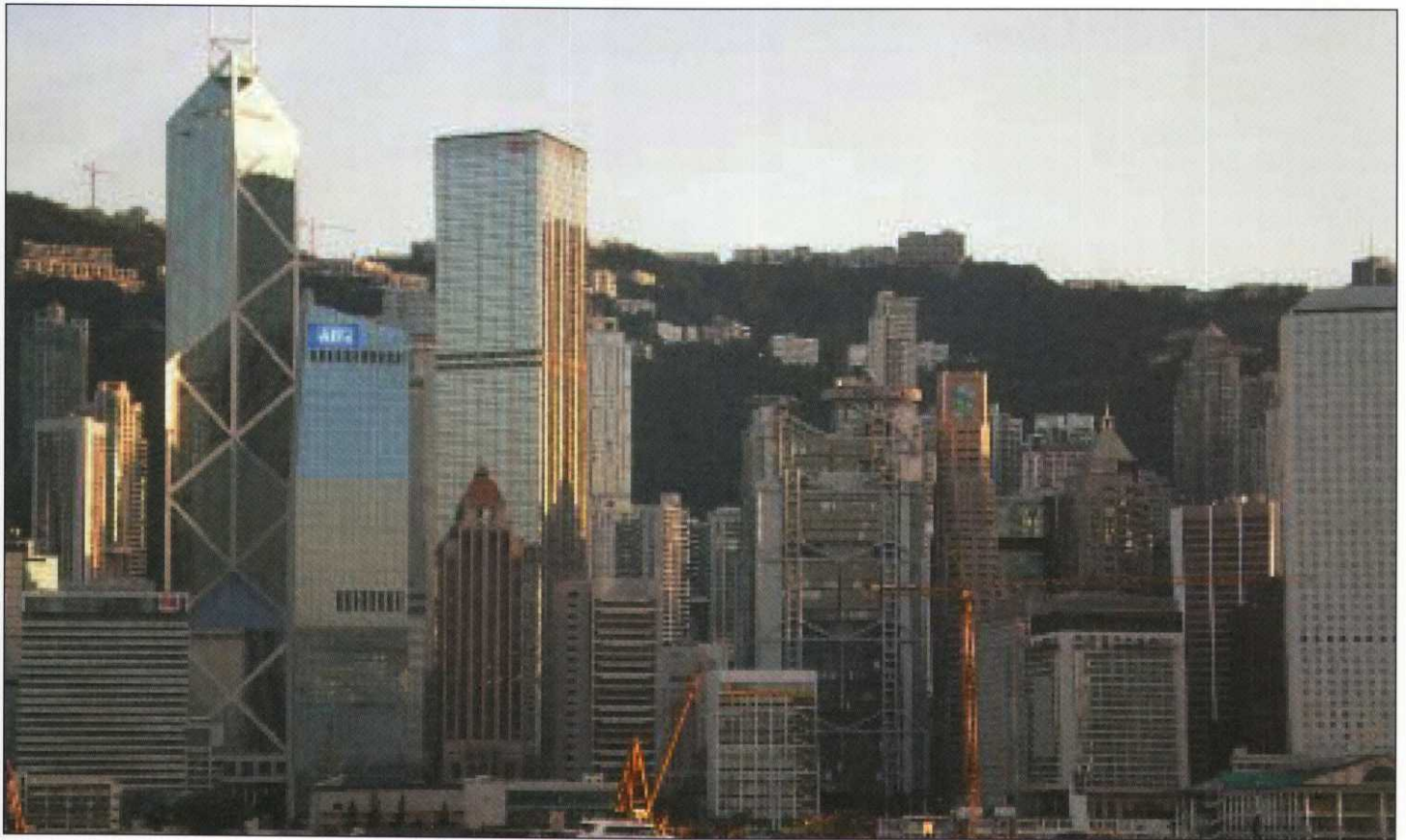


What has been the biggest surprise in maintaining a golf course in Hong Kong?

The biggest surprise, which I was not prepared for at all, was the lack of knowledge and education about the game of golf and golf course maintenance. The common, blue collar Chinese individual has had very little or no exposure to the game of golf. Most of my staff members had never been on a golf course until working here. Part of our training program is educating the staff members about the game of golf and what the game is all about. This lack of knowledge has presented obstacles in normal, daily maintenance. Most of the Chinese population has never operated any type of power or motorized equipment. Most travel by bicycle, walks, or use the public transportation system. The employees first experience with a piece of motorized or power equipment is when they are trained on the equipment here. For the typical small, shy Chinese individual, a motorized fairway or rough mower can be quite scary and intimidating. Of my five Assistants, none has any sort of education relating to turf grass management. Some have very little practical experience in any type of golf course maintenance. The most important criteria in their hiring were that they had some type of college degree, and were able to speak English. Four of the five Assistants are currently enrolled in the Penn State online program. Four of the five would have a difficult time to be considered for Foremen's positions in the United States based on their level of experience and education. They attempt to make up for their shortcomings by being eager to learn,

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make up for their shortcomings by being eager to learn, always asking questions, and willing to work long hours to get the job done.

What has been the most difficult part of the job?

Dealing with the weather has been probably the biggest challenge. In a four-month stretch from May through August, we received in excess of 30 inches of rainfall each month. Along with the rainfall, this period of time produces normal daytime highs in the upper 80s to low 90s, and relative humidity of 85% or more. These types of conditions affect everything, and make it imperative that you have good, sound management programs. Good, sound programs such as needle tine aerification, topdressing, nutrient management, pest control, disease management and scouting are essential. Under the right conditions, a green or greens can be lost in one afternoon. One has to draw on the proven basics and really understand the turf grass plant to be able to survive these extremely wet conditions and be able to provide good golf courses. Drainage, drainage and more drainage are essential.

What has been the most frustrating part of the job?

By far the most frustrating aspect has been dealing with the construction of the jumps and course for the 2008 Olympics Equestrian Events, which will be held here. The 28 jumps were constructed during the period of February 1 through October 1. Many of the jump sites are in areas of play on the three golf courses. These jump sites are approximately one

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acre in size. The existing turf and soil was excavated to a depth of 1.5 feet, and hauled off site. These areas had irrigation and drainage installed, and a new profile of 100% sand is installed, and then finally sodded with Zoysia. Many of the cart paths were used for construction haul roads, which quickly destroyed the paths. Damaging an irrigation line was quite common, usually a weekly occurrence. All the construction equipment, traffic, noise and dust made for difficult conditions for the golfer. Now the turf has all been replaced, looks very nice, and a new network of cart paths are in place. But at times a very frustrating experience. In the future, I will be writing about the Equestrian construction experience.

What has been the most rewarding part of the job?

Successfully being able to make the transition from maintaining cool season grasses to warm season grasses along with dealing with all the weather elements and the related challenges has been highly rewarding to me. Secondly, having an

effect on the lives of many of the staff members, especially my assistants. It has been a joy to be an educator each day, and to see the gleam in the assistant's eyes when programs and methods provide tangible results and conditions they can see and experience.

Which is easier to maintain: cool season or warm season grasses?

So far cool season grasses have been easier for me to maintain. Each type of turf offers unique weaknesses and strengths, pluses and minuses, good times and bad. With warm season turf, you are maintaining the turf 12 months. You must constantly be aware of maintenance programs, pest controls, dealing with the weather and maintaining playability 365 days of the year. The turf never really has a chance to take some time off for a little R & R.

How do Asian and British golf club members compare to American golf club members?

Golfers appear to be the same worldwide. The demands, complaints, etc. are all the same. Bunker concerns, green speed, ball marks, divots, speed of play issues, etc. I guess are universal. It has

been my observation that the Asian golfer's ability is far inferior to the abilities of the American golfer. A handicap of 10 or less is a rarity. The Asians enjoy the game and have fun, but are not very good at playing or really understanding the game. It appears the biggest challenge and thrill is to see how far the golfer can hit the golf ball. Some golf swings are a sight to behold!

How have I adapted to eating Chinese food? Other foods?

To begin with, I enjoy Chinese well. The Chinese food is much different than the Chinese food you will eat in America. The food here is more highly spiced and very flavorful; it gets your taste buds going. The Chinese tend to eat only fresh foods. The typical Chinese will shop daily at the local market for fresh food to prepare for the evening meal. The daily routine is to have a family member stop at the local fresh market to buy what they will prepare for the evening meal. The local super markets have a very limited supply of any type of frozen foods. They will stock a few frozen foods for Westerners. The local markets have a tremendous amount of fresh food, and at very

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expensive prices. A major part of the Chinese daily life is to eat out. The villages have an abundance of small eating establishments with all different types of Chinese and Indian food available at very cheap prices. A family of four can eat out for less than \$12 U.S. total. The one neat Chinese custom that when dining out, separate dishes for each individual are not ordered. Someone within the group or family will order a number of different dishes or courses. In the center of a table is what Americans commonly call a Lazy Susan, a small, round glass table that revolves. The food is brought out in different courses, and placed on the round table. The table is slowly turned and each member of the group take some food and places it on their plate or bowl. Depending on the size of the family or group, you may have 6 to 12 different courses or foods to dine on. I have found this to be very enjoyable and fun. The Chinese seldom have refreshment at the bar before dining. Many of the eating establishments do not even serve alcohol. Various types of tea are the beverages of choice.

*Does Hong Kong feel really strange
and "foreign" to you?*

Hong Kong the city and Hong Kong Island are very westernized. Hong Kong is one of the major shipping ports in the world. Hong Kong has a large financial center. This Westernization has created a city that is extremely diverse. Every type of nationality is represented in Hong Kong, thus every type of food is available. Western fast food is extremely popular with the Chinese. McDonalds, Pizza Hut, KFC and Krispy Kreme are very popular. A recent article in the South China Daily News newspaper brought to light that the Chinese youth are becoming overweight and experiencing health problems due to their fascination with fast food. One will seldom see a McDonalds that is not packed and people waiting in line to get in the front doors.

Has language been a problem?

Language has not been a real problem. In Hong Kong and on the island of Hong Kong, English is widely spoken and understood. In the New Territories or rural Hong Kong where our golf courses are located and I live, the area is made up of many small villages. Within these villages English is not as widely spoken, but the majority of the population has an understanding or does speak some English. Also, over time, I have begun to pick up words or phrases of Cantonese. If I need to go somewhere or do something that is too difficult to communicate, one of my Assistants who is fluent in English will write the destination or request on a card for me, then I just hand over the card to accomplish the task. So far no one has considered playing the obvious practical joke that would be possible in this situation. Thankfully, as I have mentioned before, the Chinese tend to not have much of a sense of humor and are very serious in nature.

*To date, have you regretted your
decision to go to Hong Kong?*

Though Hong Kong is much different than the good old USA, I have not regretted the decision at all. So far it has been a great experience, and I look forward to the professional and personal growth that I am sure is ahead of me, along with the challenges and adventures that will accompany that growth.