

# My part in building Vietnam's first golf course



**T**his story begins back in December 1992 when I received a telephone call from an architect friend who asked if I would be interested in a project starting soon in the Far East. At this point I was thinking he meant Hong Kong or somewhere like that, so when he said it was in Vietnam I thought he was joking. But after he repeated himself several times I realised he was not.

By the time everything had been arranged and contracts and tickets were finalised, it was February 1993 before I was on a plane heading for Bangkok and my first meeting with the American and Thai people organising this project – the very first golf course in North Vietnam. I had to spend one week in Bangkok to get my visa for entry into Vietnam. Once this was arranged I was on a plane bound for Vietnam's international airport which is no bigger than a small private flying club would use over here. We then had to travel to Hanoi where we had to stay in the army guest house (hotel). On the way to Hanoi I got my first impression of Vietnam which is very primitive – there were people working in paddy fields, there was no drainage or sanitation, no lights, the roads were unmade. As for the vehicles, they may have a bonnet but usually two wings are missing and it was nothing to see a six

**We heard recently that 20 golf courses are being planned in China. Vietnam is another country on the eve of a golf boom. Stephen Swanson of Country Side Golf Services has been to look at his second project there. Here he tells how he helped build the first golf course in North Vietnam.**

wheeler with only four wheels. They all seem to drive in the middle of the road with their hands on the horn and whoever has the most courage and the loudest horn wins.

I had to spend a week in Hanoi to get SCCI (department of commerce) approval, then began the epic journey up country to see the site. The site is surrounded by the most beautiful islands, water and mountains, and a few shacks they called holiday homes as this is a bit of a tourist place for the Vietnamese.

I walked the site with the company directors. I asked if they had any drawings or plans but was told they had not but were relying on me to come up with something, so I sat down and came up with some which took some time for us all to agree. My first objective was to mark out the course which took a few days then the next big task was to sort out the machinery which proved to be very hard because plant hire is very limited

and mainly controlled by the army. But at long last I managed to get two bulldozers and one excavator, one of the bulldozers must have been 44 years old. As for the lorries, well they were very old and pure Russian, but they did all eventually arrive on site.

Now I could finally begin trying to explain to the Vietnamese workers why we needed to flatten the land and make shapes but I was very grateful that they were very quick learners. My next problem was to find the right mixture for the greens. The stones and gravel were no problem, I had discovered a quarry on my travels. I got the sand from the river beds – it was lovely, they had been untouched for years and I found the mixture made a fine base for the greens, it was also used for the sand cement.

We are now two months into the project and I am two stones lighter as the food was scarce and, more importantly, the beer limited. Eventually I had it shipped up country via the black market. Now things are moving very quickly so I now have my next problem which was to find some irrigation. Eventually I came across a pipe factory in Haiphong but trying to explain to them was yet another problem because they only understood piping for dams so they kept asking me how high I wanted to pump the water, but I had



**Clockwise from top: at work on the 8th tees; work in progress on the 2nd; the "blacksmiths"; and a common method of transport. The Vietnamese are wonderful people to work with, says Stephen Swanson**



to explain I did not want to pump high but a long distance. We finally came to an agreement and I purchased 4inch, 2inch and 1inch pipe that was all they could offer me. I managed to get some sprinklers shipped in from Bangkok. Yet again on my travels I came across a man who specialised in pumps and we obtained an engine and pump combined, the same as the ones used over here on fairgrounds. It was very powerful so all was order and progressing very well.

Next I needed to find 40 women to start sprigging out the grass on the greens and tees. For the tees I used local, natural *Hermucla* grass; for the greens imported Tiffwarf; and Sahara seed for the fairways. We imported an Amazone spreader that fitted an old Russian tractor. I found once I had shown the people how to do the seeding they carried on with no problems but when it came to the cultivation on the fairways believe it or not I came across a farmer who had a set of discs which I used but for leveling I had to go to a shanty town called Son Tay where there are many blacksmiths which comprise an open fire with bricks around with someone who turns a bike wheel with fans on it, an anvil and two little boys with sledge hammers. As the metal turns, the boys, standing either side, hit it into shape.

And that is how I got my land leveller made.

The Vietnamese will survive on anything and everything. One day I managed to get some paint, very watery, out on the site. I remembered I had no paintbrushes so my surveyor, Mr Hiatt, went into the woods, cut a branch from a special tree and frayed out the end, bound it with reed and there was my paint brush. One woman who was 28 years old with four children used to plant grass seven days a week. She lived in all weathers on a reed boat about 10ft long, 2ft wide with a small roof. The weather in winter is very cold and damp but in the summer it is 46 degrees which means it goes from one extreme to the other.

Anyway, back to golf course work. Another

challenging experience for a good greenkeeper – once the course is all seeded, sprigged and the irrigation installed and working – is there are some very big Canadian snakes out there.

The future of Vietnam looks very bright. There are many people from Taiwan and Japan looking at developing golf courses to attract tourists. I have been approached about a couple of future projects and am looking at the site of the second course in the North. Another one has opened in the South. And there is room for a lot more.

This was a great experience and challenge and I am very pleased I was given the opportunity to be part of the project. The Vietnamese are wonderful people to work with.