



GOLF IN ASIA: NEW HORIZONS

The clubhouse at Serendah GC, north of Kuala Lumpur

Golf in Asia is a sleeping giant but it is stirring from its slumbers and when it wakes fully there will be some excellent employment opportunities for BIGGA members

Some British designers and suppliers have been working in Asia for some time – some have only recently taken the plunge. Golfconsult has worked there, and in Australia, since the late 1970s and took the big step of establishing a base in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in October last year – coinciding with the British Consultants Bureau (BCB) Mission to India, Myanmar and Malaysia led by its President, the Duke of Gloucester.

The company has a full portfolio of work, both for golf design and its consultancy expertise – principally golf investment appraisal for which, as in UK, viability problems have awakened a big demand.

Asian dynamism began in the 1970s with the emergence of the Pacific Rim economics zone. Historically, the rise and rise of Asia has been a four act scenario. The first was led by Japan, now ranked with the USA as one of the two most powerful economies in the world. Act two sees the rise of the four Asia tigers, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore compressed into just three decades. Act Three added Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia – the former now the largest producer of air conditioners and exporter of televisions and telephone appliances.

The Fourth Act is under way with China, Philippines and Vietnam being sucked into the development whirlpool. Guangdong Province in China could well become the largest manufacturing centre in the world and India has emerged on the world industrial scene. The standard of living in the early "Tigers" is already fast approaching ours with growth ratio about three times the European average. Centuries of Western supremacy have left us ill-equipped to grasp to what is happening.

Not surprisingly the development of the Asia golf business – not least in economic terms reflects these rankings with Japan in the van. There is continuous growth in all Asian countries. However, very little research has been done and the supporting services sector,

not least for consultancies, hardly exists and design is dominated largely by Australians and Americans.

The "Tiger" league rankings (Asia/Pacific) on the basis of the latest golf course figures from a recent study are:

(population in millions) Total number of golf courses – 5058 in total.

Japan	(124)	2500
Australia	(18)	1600
New Zealand	(3.5)	425
Malaysia	(19)	160
Indonesia	(191)	135
South Korea	(44)	82
India	(800)	170
Thailand	(58)	160
Philippines	(64)	60
Taiwan	(21)	80
China	(1185)	38
Singapore	(3)	32
Hong Kong	(4)	15
Vietnam	(66)	1

The table could mislead. There are allegedly some six million regular club golfers in Asia/Pacific – roughly around 1200 per course. But there are an estimated 21 million "active" players without a course of their own – most will be range customers – in Japan alone some 4000 many of whom travel far to play a course abroad.

To appreciate the gross under supply the question is how many courses would meet the demands of the "active" and clubless 21 million – probably over 10,000!

Unfortunately for the clubless and the general public put off by exclusivity and high costs the fashion has been to follow the "expensive is best" watchword – a fallacy as greenkeepers know – with bankers too but they are very slow to catch on!

History tells us differently. A glance back at the inter-war years 1920 to 1930 shows that the golf architects of those days set the standards prevailing today. Their vision of duty was to create the best with minimum disturbance as economically as possible. Such stringent criteria is a test most designers today

would fail!

There are not only 21 million active golfers buying clubs, clothes and golf balls in Asia but also 300 million middle class with disposable income, many potential golfers among them. The mind boggles at the thought when entrepreneurs find out how to entice them into the Royal and Ancient game. Those who already know are not telling.

One part of the answer is, of course, no 7000 yard "monster masterpieces" – unplayable by the paying public.

This brief insight into the vast market of Asia might give greenkeepers an idea of the greenkeeping requirements. In truth ex-patriots now fill many posts because the education facilities for local potential greenkeepers are pathetic. There is a large market for the good greenkeeper – especially Head Greenkeepers and Course Managers. They command high salaries – but they must be knowledgeable about tropical turfgrasses and diplomats par excellence.

One solution to this shortage of affordable golf in Asia is the short course complex – several or which designed by Golfconsult are on the stocks in Malaysia. Their principle benefits are economic, use less land than 18 holes, far greater capacity and the economics enable owners to lower the cost of play to a fraction of that for the fashionable monsters.

As for working in tropical turfgrass in high temperatures there are enough foreigners already there to show it is congenial. Pleasant people, English widely spoken in most countries and, with a degree of sensitivity to local customs, little risk.

Unfortunately as yet the greenkeeping bodies in Asia are not yet as well organised as BIGGA but nevertheless any ambitious members willing to try something very different should have little difficulty fitting in – provided he can find a position. Until more British take up the option it will not be easy at first.

Persistence will pay off in the end. They need us and our cost effectiveness!

■ The author, Bryan Griffiths, is Chairman of Golfconsult International Ltd.