

Turning Japanese



Clubhouse Sawara

Laurence Pithie MG returns from his travels and provides an insight into managing golf courses in Japan.

During a recent visit to Japan I had the opportunity to spend some time in the company of two senior agronomists, which enabled me to visit a number of golf courses around Tokyo. Mike Heacock of Pacific Golf Management and Simon Doyle, representing Goldman Sachs's interest, gave me an insight into the golfing industry in Japan as well as a guided tour of several of their facilities.

The following article is an account of golf course management in a country known as Nippon or Nihon, which translates as 'the origin of the sun', the name originating from China many centuries ago.

Before discussing golf course management in Japan, it is well to have an understanding of this country and how this has an effect upon maintenance and development.

Japan consists of a group of numerous islands of the eastern coast of Asia, covering approximately 2,000 miles in length. The four main islands running from north to south are Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku & Kyushu. Okinawa is further south and much smaller in comparison. Honshu is by far the largest and most populated, being central to Japan. Because of its immense expanse, Japan lies within three climatic zones, cool temperate, temperate and sub tropical. It is also a land of volcanoes, around 60 of which are still active. Japan also sits above the so called 'ring of fire' being prone to earthquakes, the last catastrophe being at Kobe in 1995 where around 600 people died.

Although large in comparison to most European countries and with a population of about 128 million (more than double that of the UK), 80% of the land surface is mountainous. The remaining 20% of lower, level areas where virtually all the population exist, have to share this with agriculture, industry and commerce. As such, many of the cities along the eastern shores of Honshu almost roll into one another in a mass of urbanisation. Fields are measured in square yards, being very small in comparison to even those in northern Europe; hence the need for compact tractors.



Fairway bridge

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Caddy, cart and magnetic track

Probably all of us are affected in some way by the ideas, culture and economy of Japan, yet it is a land of contradictions. Crowded cities yet low noise, high tech buildings and gadgets yet rural tranquillity. If we are not driving a Japanese car then we are almost certain to have some electrical items that are made in the far east. Japan is the most westernised country in Asia yet its values and beliefs were developed from a feudal system. This largely evaporated in the 20th century, especially after the end of World War 2.

The popularity of golf owes much to Japan's dynamic economy and today there are about 2,400 courses, the vast majority being of 18 holes. Driving ranges outnumber courses and driving in and around the outer Tokyo area, it is not uncommon to see ranges of only 100 m in length. These are crammed into urban spaces with extensive netting to protect surrounding areas, housing & businesses. Most have electrically operated sides, that allow the netting to be lowered when typhoons are present. Some also have vertical over-hangs, thereby even the most determined or errant shot never leaves the confines of the range. Some of the larger venues are triple decked with automated ball dispensers now fairly common. Balls are sold on an individual basis and costs vary depending upon location, but 50 will cost at least £2.50. The modern ranges have cool air blowers that are a welcome relief during the hot and humid summer when temperatures are constantly above 35 Celsius. For many avid golfers, ranges are often the only form of golf available due to the high costs of membership and the proximity of golf courses to Tokyo and Osaka for example.

Travelling around Japan can be a daunting exercise since both roads and streets have no names. Road maps are in scarce supply but fortunately many taxis and most new cars are fitted with satellite navigation, which in Japan is a virtual necessity. For visiting golf courses, it is nigh impossible to reach your destination without one and all



Stadium golf at Narita

are programmed in Japanese only! If you can't speak or read Japanese then an interpreter come guide is a must.

Although golf has been played in Japan for most of the 20th century, it is only since the dramatic rise in economic growth of the 1960's that golf development began. Prior to 1960 there were only 300 courses. The main surge in construction took place during the 1980's before coming to an abrupt halt around 1992 when the bubble burst and the economy went into free-fall. Following the collapse of the real estate market, the Tokyo Stock Exchange lost 75% of its value in 18 months. Prior to that point in time, golf club membership was exclusive and seen as an investment as well as a means of doing business with other like-minded colleagues. This also fuelled speculation, which drove prices up even higher. Paying £100,000 for a membership was fairly common plus an annual subscription of well over £2,000 meant that only the wealthy could afford to play golf. Today, typical costs are around £7,500 for membership plus £150 subs. However, a green fee is still required and this costs around £30. A caddie, usually always a female, will cost another £15. A visitor or non-member will pay around £100 for green fee, so although considerably cheaper than over a decade ago, golf remains an expensive game in comparison to most of Europe. Approximately 30% of all play is membership with the remaining 70% being from visitors.

Many of the courses built during the last boom in construction were of American design and are generally of a high standard. However it is some of the clubhouses that have to be seen to be believed. Many are palatial in size with ornate décor including large sunken baths. Extensive and colourful landscaping was also the norm since the Japanese have a love of trees and shrubs, particularly the flowering variety. A couple of the courses I visited also had mini-sized stadiums sited high above the 18th green. This presumably for large numbers of fellow members to enter into raptures of applause for witnessing the winning putt being sunk.

UK golf in comparison, is relatively cheap and it is the availability and costs of suitable land that makes golf so expensive. The further up the mountain, the newer the course, which is not too dissimilar to Spain's east coast.

The financial collapse of many golf clubs was not just restricted to Japan. Many Japanese owned courses had to be sold off in order to recover part of the debt. Today, the banks own many of the clubs in Japan and it is they who are the main operators via golf management companies. In many instances, the debenture holders only recovered around 5% of their investment and some harsh lessons were learned on economic sustainability. The last word carrying a certain 'ring' in today's economic and environmental climate.

As other countries in the Far East such as Korea start to develop destination resort courses, the experiences in Japan have been noted but it still appears to be ego-driven by wealthy individuals. In the coming years, it will be interesting to see if countries far nearer to home such as Ireland, Spain & Dubai will suffer a golfing recession as developments there continue unabated and are becoming more dependant on selling properties, often at an inflated price. The question of available water is also one for future concern although probably not in Ireland.

Next month's article will look into the various challenges and standards of managing golf courses in Japan.