

Mining for golfing treasure in Malaysia

By Brad Klein

The Malaysian town of Kajang is a ramshackle stretch of two-story wooden structures that seem to teeter on the brink of collapse. Everyone, it seems, travels on a bicycle or on one of those little two-stroke motorcycles. The local version of fast food is "satay," a sizzling skewer of pungent chicken, lamb or beef cooked in sidewalk stalls. The weather is usually hot and steamy, and a foreigner walking down the crowded streets cannot help but feel like the man who has just lost his American Express card.

If the sights and sounds are familiar, that's because visitors have encountered them before in films and spy novels about Southeast Asia. Yet this time, the attraction is not war but golf course development. A new project, called The Mines Resort, is underway 12 miles to the north, on the outskirts of Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur.

The brainchild behind The Mines is Lee Kim Yew, a 39-year-old native of Kuala Lumpur who serves as managing director of the project. Soft-spoken yet hard-driving, he has a clear vision of future goals and surrounds himself with people who will get the job done right. His two assistants, marketing manager C.S. Ong and project manager T.G. Ng, are constantly at his side and meticulous in their attention to detail.

To date, their major success has been Country Heights, a 57-acre comprehensive residential and recreational community, nearby to The Mines. Country Heights is a pricey development, replete with its own shops, equestrian quarters, and a World Tennis Centre featuring a 1,500-seat stadium and Asia's first Rebound Ace court surfaces.

Since Malaysia is a country where the newly emergent elite are highly protective of their status, one of Country Heights' selling points is the constant presence of armed security guards. Apparently, this helps the residents feel safe. But then special care needs to be taken, since the choicest homesite of all belongs to the prime minister. His presence is one of many indications that Lee is politically well-connected and moves among influential circles.

Two miles north of Country Heights, virtually adjacent to a new horse-racing track that is now going up, is the 900-acre site destined for The Mines.

For years the site served as one of the country's largest tin mines. An abandoned open-cast mine that was left behind is now a 154-acre, 500-foot-deep lake. Several other ponds dot the property. The subsurface is a combination of limestone, sandstone and clay. Elevation changes by 150 feet, much of it on bluffs that overlook the lake that will be the centerpiece of the project.

Lee, who is not a golfer, decided to hire Robert Trent Jones Jr. after

he had a look at Joondalup, north of Perth in Western Australia. "That Joondalup is a beautiful course," said Lee. "I like it because Mr. Jones built it through the canyons and ravines of an abandoned quarry. We also have a quarry, but The Mines is more dramatic."

Don Knott, the lead designer for "Bobby" Jones on Joondalup, will take on the same responsibilities for The Mines.

"The site itself is unique," said Knott. "With its significant elevation changes on a bluff above that massive lake, there's the chance there to build an Asian version of Pebble Beach."

Knott estimates that excavation of the cast mine involved the removal, over many years, of 100 million cubic yards of earth. "About a quarter of that is stockpiled on the site right now, and we plan to use much of that material for our contour work."

Some 2.2 million cubic yards of dirt will be moved, and construction costs for the par-71, 6,820-yard layout should come to about \$10 million.

The front nine, routed around a large hill, cuts through wetlands and sparse woods. The holes gradually climb until, at the 9th tee, the golfer finds himself at the highest point of the property, 120 feet above the lake.

The back nine snakes along the eastern bank of the lake. The 396-yard 10th hole will run along a bluff overlooking the water on the left. Eleven, a 550-yard par 5, sits closer astride the lake and incorporates the water along the near side of the dogleg left.

After a loop of holes at the northern end of the course, the 319-yard



Above is a view to the north along the edge of the water-filled abandoned tin mine, site of The Mines Resort in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Photo courtesy of Robert Trent Jones II International

15th and the 192-yard 16th will play close to the water's edge on the right side. The golf course finishes with the 524-yard 17th and the 423-yard 18th perched on a second tier of the quarry-like cliffs, affording golfers a generous view of the whole site.

The full-time field supervisor is Glen Nickles, from Greenscape, Ltd., the affiliated construction division of Robert Trent Jones II International. Nickles will oversee every step of the building process, from clearing to cut and fill and final shaping.

Administration is being managed by Al Furber, who as Jones' chief of Asian operations has worked with

the company on more than 30 projects throughout the region.

Construction, already underway, should take about 18 months. Plans call for hybrid Bermudagrass fairways, and Tiftwarf Bermudagrass greens and tees. Ornamental lovegrasses will add texture and highlight the bluffs.

With any luck, the first official tee shot should be struck in early 1994.

Lee has ambitious plans to develop the surrounding property. Jeff Feilman, the Australian-based land planner who worked on Joondalup, has been retained to integrate housing, hotel, roads and other infrastructure. The clubhouse, always a spectacular undertaking in Asia,

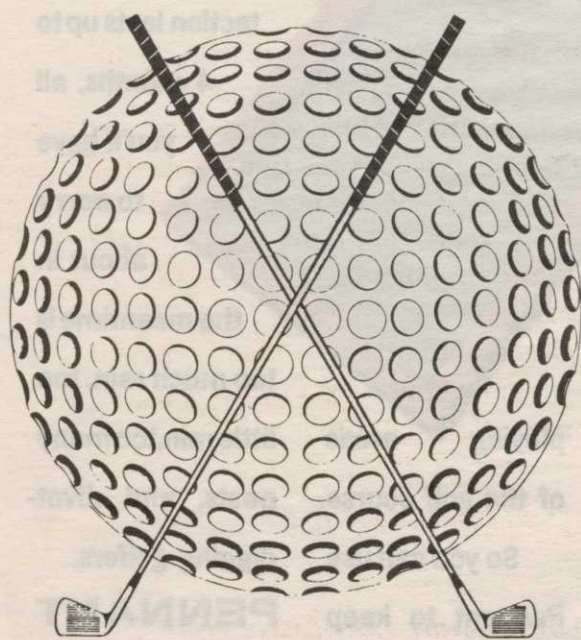
has been assigned to Parisian architect Philip Stark.

To show he's serious about the golfing, Lee traveled in April 1991 to the Golf Asia '91 show in Singapore and came back with \$50,000 worth of antique clubs and balls. Back in his office at Country Heights the next day, he got on the phone to track down an interior designer who would build a suitable display case for the golf artifacts.

Only one problem remains, Lee admits. "The site is big enough for 36 holes. Who should I get to do the other 18?"

A visitor suggests Rees Jones. Lee calls out to Ng: "Make a note of that name. Maybe I call him."

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