

## Robin's Travels

**W**e asked golf course architect Robin Nelson to list the big differences between designing golf courses in the United States and overseas. Take it away, Robin:

### Travel and distance

Projects in Asia require lengthy airplane rides. It's not uncommon to spend 24 hours traveling from office to destination. From there it may be another 12 to 24 hours before reaching the site because of quality of roads, travel arrangements or even the mode of transportation.

During construction of the Shenzhen Xili GC near Hong Kong, travel was by taxi, bus, plane, train, foot, private car and motor scooter.

Other modes of transportation have included long boats, helicopter, camel and Lear jet. My favorite was the Mercedes private limousine with the three-inch bulletproof glass.

### Time zones

When my headquarters was in Hawaii, I often endured "time-warp trips" — Hawaii to Europe is a 12-hour time change, and the East Coast to Japan is another 12-hour change.

Unless a client is extremely sympathetic, you're expected to start impressing everyone with dramatic instructions immediately after a 22-hour plane flight and journey to the site.

### Language

In Asia, it is common to struggle with communication between the owner and architect, or the architect and the construction company leader.

While golf is a universal language (par, birdie, etc.), such things as back-filling trenches, ordering pump stations on time or, "You have to start planning the clubhouse sometime soon," can be lost in the translation.

Usually, my main concern is making sure what I draw on my plans becomes

translated correctly to the people doing the construction work — so my drawing skills are imperative. A person's pantomime, charade and facial-expression skills get tested quickly when working overseas.

### Professional construction companies

In the United States, I can put a project out to bid and expect a pre-qualified list of five to 10 experienced golf course contractors who will bid on a job. This isn't the case in a lot of projects overseas.



**Robin Nelson — Have camel, will travel.**

There are many companies that say they're qualified, but I've had enough experience not to play that game. There's too much at stake to allow companies "on-the-job-training."

### Maintenance

This is probably the most frustrating part of working overseas. The GCSAA has made huge strides the last few decades to advance maintenance of golf courses in the United States, and it's making progress in spreading the education and skills to the new golf markets. But many parts of the world are still eons behind.

Until the four facets of a golf course — design, construction, maintenance and operations — are equally balanced, we will be facing an uphill struggle. A lot of effort is put into explaining the

importance of how money can be saved if the resources are put to use in the proper place and at the proper time.

A good example is the process of hiring a qualified superintendent. In many countries, I still face the argument that a gardener can run a maintenance operation.

### Labor

On a typical overseas project, it's not uncommon for 500 people to dig ditches, carry dirt and spread sand by hand.

### Proximity of suppliers and vendors

A phone call will usually get results and replacement parts immediately to a site in the United States. But in Asia, it may be weeks or months before parts can be flown in, pass inspection, pass customs, be picked up and delivered.

### Environmental concerns

The United States has many regulations regarding golf course construction. An architect worth his salt is a strict environmentalist, diligently follows every guideline and is well-versed in natural systems and environmental protection.

This is where we're making the most progress in developing countries — by applying these methods where there are no such guidelines or restrictions.

### Social conditions

No construction can begin in the United States without having absolute title to a piece of real estate. This isn't always the case overseas, where many times there's no clear title, the land is in dispute or there may be squatters on the land.

There have also been many instances of violence over land ownership. Golf course routing must often be changed spontaneously to accommodate squatters' rights because of a last-minute document that "appears" by decree of local chiefs — or to avoid being blown away by shotgun.

---

*Nelson, who has worked on golf courses in 21 countries, can be reached at [RNGCA@mindspring.com](mailto:RNGCA@mindspring.com).*