

Golfing in Southeast Asia: Agoda says the region's right on par with top 10 golf resort pick list

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It's no real surprise that Southeast Asia has become a golf Mecca. With over 32,000 courses and an estimated 50 million active golfers, the sport is the fastest growing in the world. Factor in Southeast Asia's diverse terrain, expanse of land and ingenuity for hospitality and it is understandable why avid golfers are seeking out the greener side of fairways in this part of the globe.

According to Agoda, an online hotel bookings site that specializes in accommodation in Asia, the popularity of vacationers who wish to book golf holidays in Southeast Asia (SEA) is no anomaly. In fact, the demand is ever-increasing, which is why the web travel authority has decided to release its top 10 golf resort pick list.

Says Vice President of Business Development at Agoda, Wilfred Fan, "Asians have always had an affinity with golf. It's been the most popular leisure activity in Japan and Korea for over two decades. But now this region actually harbors golf courses of an international standard, it is becoming more and more recognized worldwide."

With stalwarts such as Jack Nicklaus, Nick Faldo, Colin Montgomerie and Greg Norman all having designed courses in their name within the SEA region, Fan's statement has more than a ball's weight. But it's not all about the teeing off.

"The drawing card for most golf enthusiasts – besides a challenging course – is the price. SEA can offer a prime golfing experience at a fraction of the cost, plus there are other benefits such as spa and massage facilities which are simply peerless in this region," Fan added.

Trends around the globe tend to agree. Just last year, Vietnam was named the undiscovered golf destination of 2007 by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators. The country has 15 existing courses with 30 more in development including designs from Greg Norman and Colin Montgomerie. The same international association named Malaysia best golf destination in Southeast Asia, an accolade supported by the number of golfing tourists. Malaysian tourism statistics reveal that golf generated more than US \$242 million in revenue last year.

Likewise, golf resorts in SEA have become increasingly popular choices among travelers making hotel bookings. Agoda has seen a definite spike in bookings in the past few years.

"We have a definite niche market of individuals booking golf resort accommodation in Southeast Asia through our site," says Fan. "The appeal goes beyond the activity and to the destination. For example, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam have seen a 400 percent increase in bookings that offer golf and spa in the region just in the last two years."

However, it's not just about the grass becoming greener. Fan believes that a large part of SEA's appeal as a golf destination is the relaxation services which are complementary to the sport.

"For as many men and women there are that play golf, there will be the spouses and partners that prefer a vacation that is about pampering and relaxation. This is where the SEA region excels above all else as spa services are simply second-to-none

– and more than reasonable when it comes to cost.”

Will the trend continue? The proof is in the development. Jon Tomlinson, general manager of Montgomerie Links, a Colin Montgomerie course in development on Vietnam’s Central Coast says that the popularity of golf in the region is not likely to fizzle soon.

“Demand is through the roof for membership already with the Montgomerie Links and you can just gauge from the number of golf courses being built around the region that interest in high quality golfing experiences has increased dramatically. Also, it is refreshing for golfers to play in an Asian landscape and that inimitable Asian sense for hospitality makes golfing here all the more appealing. Destination is key.”

Agoda’s top 10 golfing resorts in the region are:

1. Laguna Phuket Golf Club, Phuket (Thailand)

Lauded already in numerous publications as one of Asia’s premier golf resort destinations, the Laguna Phuket Golf Club is set among the Laguna Resort Complex which features five luxury hotels (Sheraton, Dusit Thani, Banyan Tree, Laguna Beach Resort and Allamande). It boasts an 18-hole, par-71 course designed by Max Wexler and David Abell and caters to players of all levels of expertise. But the course certainly is challenging as 13 of the 18 holes are in close proximity to the actual lagoon. Golfers can enjoy taking the watery gamble with their shots. Afterwards, pampering is essential at the world famous Banyan Tree Spa.

2. Le Meridien Nirwana Golf & Spa Resort, Bali (Indonesia)

The five-star Le Meridien Golf & Spa Resort is a luxury resort overlooking the Indian Ocean with world-class golf and spa facilities. The Nirwana Bali Golf Club boasts an 18-hole course designed by the legendary Greg Norman, and has been featured in several publications. The course is made challenging by the elaborate network of streams, ponds and terraces plus its ocean lapping location. After playing, relax at the fusion Nirwana Spa which uses Western products while keeping the Balinese Hindu philosophy in mind.

3. Novotel Ocean Dunes and Golf Resort, Phan Thiet (Vietnam)

Located three hours from Ho Chi Minh City, the four-star Novotel Ocean Dunes and Golf Resort is located on a private beach and was the first international resort to be built in Vietnam. The Par-72 Ocean Dunes Golf Club located on-site has been designed by Nick Faldo and been identified it as one of the top 10 resort courses in Asia. The course will appeal to both experienced as well as casual golfers, and the coastal winds will bring challenge to each hole. The on-site Spa has private saunas and Jacuzzis for customers use after a round of golf. Or you can go in for a massage before you take to the course, helping to relax the muscles and improve that swing.

4. Kirimaya Golf Resort & Spa , Khao Yai (Thailand)

The three star Kirimaya Golf Resort & Spa provides 60 contemporary living options and is the perfect retreat for those looking for a golf holiday. The 18-hole golf course has been designed by the legendary Jack Nicklaus and is set among the mountains and greenery of Khao Yai. Guests can indulge in a range of massages and wellness rituals at the Maya Spa or in the comfort of their own rooms after a day spent on the course or exploring the surroundings.

5. The Empire Hotel & Country Club, Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei Darussalam)

The five star Empire Hotel & Country Club and beach resort overlooking the South China Sea boasts of lavish accommodations, eight swimming pools and a championship golf course. Designed by the celebrated Jack Nicklaus, the golf course includes cliffs, ravines, tight fairways, large bunkers, and is floodlit for night-time games. Also not to be missed is the Spa, with its therapies from around the world designed to calm the body and revitalize the skin.

6. Hornbill Golf & Jungle Club, Sarawak (Malaysia)

The five star Hornbill Golf & Jungle Club is nestled amongst the oldest and second largest rainforest in the world, 1,000 meters above sea level. As the name suggests, the main attraction of the hotel is its golf course designed by Neil Crater, while keeping in mind the features of its unique highland location. The course is the ultimate test of golfing skills, and is suited for those who love a fresh physical challenge as well as a mental one. With the number of guests kept to just 60 a day, it provides ample exclusivity and privacy to indulge at a calm pace. The Jungle Club continues to keep up the promise of relaxation and rejuvenation with its pampering sessions of spa, exotic traditional massages and a range of natural treatments.

7. Bintan Lagoon Resort, Bintan Island (Indonesia)

The four-star Bintan lagoon Resort is set among 300 hectares of beachfront gardens and offers a world of choice. This golfing resort can easily be reached by a short high-speed ferry ride from Singapore. Both the Jack Nicklaus 18-hole Sea View Golf course and Ian Baker-Finch 18-hole Woodlands Golf course at the resort are known for their spectacular design and signature holes. The stay is incomplete without a visit to the Bintan Spa, where traditional methods are used in conjunction with organic ingredients for the ultimate relaxation experience. Choose from a range of treatments, scrubs, and spa packages.

8. Springfield Village Golf & Spa, Hua Hin/Cha-am (Thailand)

The 3.5 star Springfield Village Golf & Spa provides luxurious rooms and suites, designed to blend with their surroundings and each providing an open view of the golf course. The golf course (another design by Jack Nicklaus) challenges golf enthusiasts with 27 meticulously manicured holes. The championship course has five sets of tees to play from, and offers varying levels of difficulty. For those looking to improve their game, step there is an excellent Learning Center which offers private lesson. Be sure to head over to the Springfield Spa to pamper and rejuvenate yourself with a wide variety of top notch massages and treatments on offer.

9. Sentosa Resort & Spa, Singapore (Singapore)

The five-star Sentosa Resort & Spa is perched atop a cliff gazing out across the South China Sea. The resort's 21 rooms and suites are spread across 27 acres of tropical woodlands. The resort also boasts the Spa Botanica, housing mud pools, flotation pools, a meditation labyrinth and Turkish-styled steam baths and a wide choice of indoor treatment rooms or outdoor pavilions. Just across the road from the hotel, enjoy a round of golf at Sentosa Golf Club, which boasts two of the most scenic and challenging courses in the region. Sentosa Golf Club is also home to the Barclay's Singapore Open and is the course of choice for politicians, dignitaries and celebrities alike.

10. Sofitel Zhongshan Golf Resort, Nanjing (China)

The five-star colonial-styled, Sofitel Zhongshan Golf Resort Nanjing is located on the slopes of the famous Purple Mountain, and features 140 luxurious accommodations. This resort is the perfect choice for leisure as well as business travelers to Nanjing. It is also the first deluxe, five-star golf resort in Nanjing, and the exclusive 27-hole golf course was designed by Gary Player. Guests can also enjoy the Spa, with its various massages and treatments, guaranteed to relax and ease the muscles.

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