

Photos: Golfplan

Golf's pioneers

ASGCA members have been responsible for pioneering golf projects throughout the world. Richard Humphreys finds out more about the challenges and rewards of designing courses in emerging markets for golf.

From its foundation to the present day, ASGCA members have consistently been at the forefront of pioneering projects throughout the world, introducing golf to new audiences and at the same time helping spur economic development in all four corners of the globe.

ASGCA Fellow Jack Nicklaus says that one of his greatest motivations for golf course design is to create opportunities in emerging markets to introduce and grow the game. "It is, for me, the challenge of going into countries and markets and shaping the game of golf—and through golf, impacting tourism, economies, and lives around the globe."

Speaking in *Secrets of Golf Course Architects*, published by the ASGCA in 2008, Nicklaus gives the example of his firm's work in the Dominican Republic. Punta Espada Golf Club opened in 2007 and helped the developer at Cap Cana to achieve record-setting property sales and employment in the area. "The project created more than 4,000 jobs, most of them for Dominicans from Punta Cana to Santo Domingo," says Nicklaus.

Here we look at four other examples from recent years.

Lake Victoria Golf Resort

Eighteen holes at Lake Victoria Golf Resort just outside Kampala, Uganda, opened for play in 2018, following a 10-year project by Golfplan. The golf course was to complement the Serena Lake Victoria Resort on the shores of Lake Victoria.

"This was to be the second 18-hole course in the region, as far as I know," says Kevin Ramsey, ASGCA, of Golfplan. "The Uganda Golf Club in Kampala dates back over 100 years and is a by-product of British colonization. Lake Victoria golf course is the only one in the country built to modern USGA recommendations.

"Similar to many developing countries that we work in, it is difficult to find proper equipment and, on top of that, nobody knows what a golf course is, let alone what it should look like.

"The owners were golfers and have travelled throughout the world and have some perspective on what golf is like in the USA, Singapore and Dubai.

"The construction team was a different scenario altogether. It was imperative to not only provide highly-detailed plans and drawings for the engineers to follow in the general earthworks, but also to provide a team of highly skilled expats to direct and implement the detailed work. This involved a group of shapers, supervisors and an irrigation manager."

The project involved two phases of nine holes each. The



Golfplan's Kevin Ramsey, ASGCA, designed an 18-hole layout at Lake Victoria Golf Resort in Uganda. Right, a team of local laborers working on site

first phase was completed seven years after the project's conception, and the second phase took another three years.

"The main delay in construction was due to the earthwork as we got closer to what we believed was the shoreline of Lake Victoria," says Ramsey. "A large part of the site ended up being some form of swampland of papyrus, and needed to be filled and stabilized. This was a time-consuming task with the equipment on hand and the need for additional fill material.

"The site was generally flat or was slightly tilted towards the lake. It required excavating many lakes to generate material to build the features of the golf course and to create positive drainage. As this was to be a championship resort course, we needed to be able to accommodate resort golfers with the majority being higher handicap. We used the lakes as the main strategic element on many holes while providing ample bailout areas to allow for the higher handicappers to be able to navigate their way around the course. When not strategic, we kept the lakes out of the play areas to minimize the difficultly of having a lot of water on the site.

> "Over the 10 years the course was under construction there were at least 100 laborers on site every day

"It is not a 'grip it and rip it' course. It is strategic and you must think and position your way around. We incorporate this into all our courses, and this was to be no different. During the opening professional tournament this was an eye-opening experience for many of the pros as they had never played on anything like this. They were used to overpowering older, shorter courses with their length. It is very difficult to be successful with that approach and the scores were high but got lower each day as they learned the course and where they could take chances."

During Ramsey's visits over the 10 years the course was under construction there were at least 100 laborers on site every day, as well as the management team and engineers.

"Now that the course is open there are approximately 40 workers taking



Photo: Jacob Sjoman

care of the course, another 30 caddies and an additional 30 workers in the clubhouse running the pro shop and restaurant," says Ramsey. "Since it began, it has employed at least 100 local people.

"It has created an immense amount of pride to the people of Kampala and Uganda—having a high-quality, modern, championship golf course in their country. It adds a marketing benefit to the Serena Hotel Group as they now have a golf resort hotel in their portfolio. To the owners, The Cementers Group—a large project contractor—it is also a badge of honor and pride to have created this in their home country."

BlackSeaRama Golf and Thracian Cliffs

"Being a part of the growth and emergence of golf in developing markets has been an amazing experience for me," says Jeff Lawrence, ASGCA, a senior designer and vice president at Gary Player Design. "Knowing that people in all parts of the world have exposure to the great game of golf is a very meaningful accomplishment and it's great to see significant impacts on the cities and countries that benefit from this expansion of golf.

"The global footprint reaches many parts of the world, and Gary Player Design has been fortunate to implement golf in countries that have had little-to-no exposure to this great game.

"One example is our work in Bulgaria, a culture that had very little exposure to golf until the early 90s when the market opened up to tourism and golf. We cultivated a relationship with developers who envisioned two courses along the Black Sea to promote golf and tourism. Although only five kilometers apart, both sites were distinctively different and provided an opportunity to design two courses that would complement one another."

In 2008, the first course—BlackSeaRama Golf & Villas Resort—was built on a flat site and was designed to expose golfers from Bulgaria and surrounding countries to a visually appealing, well maintained, playable and fun golf experience.

"Being the first high-quality golf course in Bulgaria, we tried to keep concepts simplified to ensure the finished product was sustainable and profitable for the client," says Lawrence. "Material acquisition, implementation and resources were all challenging, but assembling the right team to execute the work was the key to delivering a successful golf product."

The second course, Thracian Cliffs Golf & Beach Resort, followed two years later and was quite different to BlackSeaRama. "Set on the cliffs of the Black Sea, we designed a course that was visually stunning and strategically challenging, utilizing the natural features that were available to us," says Lawrence. "A very technical site to implement a golf course, we creatively routed and executed our design to showcase the natural beauty of the site while also being environmentally sensitive to the coastal ecosystem.

"The realization of BlackSeaRama and Thracian Cliffs have promoted



Above: Agile Golf & Country Club in Zhongshan was the first residental golf community in China, with JMP Golf Design's Mark Hollinger, ASGCA, responsible for the design. Left: Jeff Lawrence, ASGCA, helped to create Thracian Cliffs in Bulgaria, one of the first 18-hole golf courses in the country.

golf and tourism in Bulgaria and has also provided exposure to the local population while also creating economic benefits. Thracian Cliffs hosted the Volvo World Match Play while BlackSeaRama has held the Bulgarian Open on numerous occasions."

The number of registered golfers in Bulgaria has also increased by over 500 per cent between 2010 and 2018, according to data from KPMG's latest *Golf Participation Report for Europe*.

"Contribution, adaptability and sustainable benefits are key drivers when designing golf courses in emerging markets," says Lawrence. "There are so many variables when venturing into the unknown. Listening to the client, understanding the culture and having an open mind are all creditable attributes when designing and implementing golf in new markets.

"Limited resources, cultural differences, language barriers and the lack of experienced personnel are the biggest hurdles in delivering golf courses in new markets. Be assured, there will always be challenges when designing golf courses in developing markets, but it's how you react and solve these challenges that makes the biggest difference.

"We hope that every project we have undertaken provides a significant contribution to the game of golf and also benefits the local community. It is a privilege to design golf courses around the world and to expose the sport to people that know little about this great game."

Agile Golf & Country Club

"During my three decades working as a professional golf architect as well as landscape architect around the globe, my firm's golf courses have almost always impacted the direction and quality of development in each country and region in which we have worked in a positive manner," says Mark Hollinger, ASGCA, of JMP Golf Design Group. "Not so much merely because it is the introduction of a recreational endeavor such as the game of golf, but because we—as land planners, landscape architects and golf designers all rolled into one—had the unique opportunity to create a new total natural environment for the places in which people live and work on a grand scale. We have been blessed to have the chance to create something on a massive piece of land which could be much improved over the typical urban and concrete sprawl which has gone before.

"Most of our projects, which have provided the most impact for a specific region, have been planned residential commercial golf community developments, which have a golf course as the main recreational and view-oriented open space feature. The golf course provides recreational opportunity, but beyond it provides an open space for people to enjoy a new living, natural, green environment in which to live and work. One which attracts wildlife, with green grass, blue flowing water, trees and white sand."

Hollinger's firm was responsible for one of the first residential golf communities in mainland China—

Agile Golf & Country Club in Zhongshan, which opened in 2000.

"The challenges were always many, because in some of our initial attempts, we had no idea if a club golf market would even exist, or if people would understand or appreciate the concept and, if so, would it help promote and sell real estate?" says Hollinger. "Would the club or community lifestyle become popular, and would people pay a premium to move away from their concrete jungles in order to exist there and possibly work? Would they feel safe and could a golf club concept thrive and grow, and what level of quality of management and care would it require?

"Well, the answers all proved to be a resounding yes, and we always aim very high on an international scale, with the level of design quality with both golf architecture, community landscaping as well as structural architecture. All we produced was very well received in numerous locations and became strong keys to our success.

"It seemed China had been waiting for an impetus to push a better living residential and community lifestyle and well-designed and well-managed golf residential communities provided the stimulus. It was the exact right product at the right time in the right place."

The R&A's *Golf Around the World* report states that Asia accounted for 32 percent of all new current golf projects worldwide in 2017. Much of this growth can be attributed in China, where 187 new courses opened between 2010 and 2017, according to the report.

"The benefits have been many," says Hollinger. Golf has grown dramatically within China, in spite of recent government attitudes towards this western sport and use of land and water—that is another story altogether.

"The quality of residential development has risen drastically in many cities away from urban sprawl towards a more environmentally-sensitive green theme. These developments have caused neighboring developments to improve and upgrade in order to remain competitive. This has generated significant urban renewal situations in specific areas which have transformed many cities in China and throughout Asia in general."

JMP Golf Design Group completed a number of the first round of residential golf communities within mainland China. "These communities have transformed specific regions of major cities in a way that nothing else could possibly do, as in quality of life and quality of natural setting," says Hollinger. "These communities are heavily utilized and coveted and have changed the course of urban development in some areas. We were amazed and quite pleased to learn over time that more than two-thirds of residential buyers within these developments were not even golfers—they just loved the environment that the golf course helped create. While we did this kind of project in other countries, the demand for it in mainland China was significant. I went on to help create more than 20 of these types of projects in China alone."

Myotha National Golf Club

Myanmar (formerly Burma) is one of the most exotic and least developed countries in Asia. There are over 50 million people but less than 20 golf courses. "Most of these courses are very spartan, rudimentary layouts that were established by British interests long ago and mostly played by government and military staff to this day," says Brian Curley,



ASGCA, of Schmidt-Curley Design. "Most feature minimal, antiquated irrigation systems and nominal equally-antiquated maintenance equipment resulting in rather poor overall conditioning. This, however, comes with some very inexpensive green fees and a certain humble charm, but far from what most would consider an adequate overall experience.

"Prior to the Second World War, Burma was one of the richest countries in south-east Asia but following the retreat of British interests, the country became quite impoverished. The country is, however, witnessing a resurgence in economic growth and has become a strong tourist destination, especially to Ancient Bagan, about 60 miles south of the Myotha National site. The countryside is awash with countless temples and pagodas, often covered in golden rooftops and there is a very welcoming culture."

Myotha National Golf Club, south of Mandalay in Myanmar, was built on an almost 2,000-acre site, and the course is the centerpiece of what is becoming an industrial manufacturing complex whose produce is shipped down the Irrawaddy, the largest river in the country.

"I predict that, soon, a significant number of products will be manufactured in Myanmar for world consumption and many will be made here," says Curley. "Having the golf course as recreation for the middle management will play a huge role in the success of the project and the ability to lure the establishment of factories, many from foreign interests, to a remote site.

> "The project will undoubtably benefit the local population with jobs they would have never expected

"While the course is relatively new—having opened early this year—it has already garnered significant attention as the best course in the country and as a significant course in the entire Asian market.

"The site is quite unique for Asia with an arid climate and vegetation somewhat reminiscent of Arizona. Consequently, we created a desert-style layout with reduced overall turf and transitional bunkering that ties into the outer areas, but with a strong emphasis on wide landing areas to promote playability. Every golfer who visits is blown away by the look and its departure from all the parkland-style courses in the country today.

"The primary challenges centered on the remote location and ability to get proper construction equipment," continues Curley. "The construction process ran well short of a typical pace as the local laborers are not setting any speed records! The initial and largest hurdle was transferring water to the site from the river, over 10 miles away. This was a long process but was well worth the effort as the large reservoirs we incorporated to capture seasonal monsoon rains will likely be adequate, but cannot be 100 percent trusted.

"The project will undoubtedly benefit the local population with jobs they would have never expected and the course itself will attract tourism, especially golf tourists who perhaps travel here now but without clubs in hand." ●



Brian Curley, ASGCA, expects Myotha National Golf Club to attract tourism and bring jobs to the local population

Photos: Schmidt-Curley Design

