

a Kingdom of courses

Thomas E. King tees off at some of Thailand's best golf courses and finds plenty of reasons to smile.



Ninety years ago, the number of golf courses in the Kingdom of Thailand could easily have been counted on just one hand. While early starters like the Royal Dusit Golf Club in Bangkok and the 'grandfather' of them all, the 1898 Gymkhana Club in northerly Chiang Mai, still welcome golfers looking for a tryst with yesteryear, it's perhaps the Royal Hua Hin Golf Club that best epitomises the gentle sport as it was played in a less-hurried era.

Opened in 1924, the Royal Hua Hin, an easy three-hour drive south of the Bangkok, was an early joint venture between East and West. His Majesty King Rama VII and Queen Rambhai Barni were the first royal

golfers. Always accompanied by an entourage from the Thai capital, the royal pair would board a special train and proceed to the charming seaside village of Hua Hin. They would alight at the still-standing ornate railway station and proceed over the tracks to the nearby field of green.

Back in those days, a game at the Royal Hua Hin took on an exceptional thrill. It was frequently reported that tiger tracks could be seen in the bunkers, as the nocturnal animals would come down from the surrounding hills in search of water. The tigers have long gone, but the densely forested hills have barely changed.

A panoramic background of



Main: Getting ready to tee off on the fairways of Thailand

Opposite page: Sun, sea and sand on one of Thailand's beachside golf courses

Right: Sun and Palm trees on a southern Thai golf course



limestone cliffs and heavily wooded hills are characteristic features of this very natural course, as are fine vistas to the distant Gulf of Thailand. Golfers appreciate the views, but their real interest is the 18-hole, 6678-yard layout that was granted championship status in 1958.

In the far north of the golf-friendly kingdom, the scenery at another superb sporting sanctuary is equally as pleasing. Northern Thailand's most popular destination, Chiang Mai, has all the components for a thoroughly

enjoyable and easily affordable golf holiday. Resting in a refreshingly fertile valley over 300 metres high, Chiang Mai is an only an hour's flight from Bangkok.

Ease of access and a pleasing climate are significant factors contributing to tourism success in Thailand's second-largest city. Over the past few decades, the active promotion of several other plus-points, including the area's spectacular scenery and its unique culture, has helped in luring a

multitude of visitors.

The most recent addition to the growing list of attractive appeals has been the development of choice golf resorts. Backdropped by mountains, embraced by a tranquil valley and set amid streams and woods, one of several playing fields to green the greater metropolitan area is the Royal Chiangmai Golf Club.

Coming off the creative drawing boards of the Melbourne-based Thomson, Wolveridge and Perrett, the Royal's 6969-yard course is

Right: Enjoying the greens on one of Thailand's golf courses

Below: A unique feature of the Rose Garden is the energetic team of ball-retrieving klong boys



stayoncourse

For those who aren't holidaying beyond the Thai capital, or are in Bangkok on business, here are some golf courses in the vicinity of the city.

Krungthep Kreetha

This is an older city course that has had a good overhaul in recent years and now has an attractive layout; plenty of trees demand a degree of accuracy.

Natural Park Ramindra

This Jack Nicklaus-designed course can be a real challenge, with lakes at half of the holes and greens surrounded by deep bunkers. Excellent clubhouse.

Navatane Golf Club

Designed back in 1975 for the World Cup, and thus boasting a fine collection of mature trees and shrubbery, this course is still very popular with overseas visitors.

Panya Indra Golf Club

This extensively landscaped, 27-hole course just north of Bangkok is quite testing on occasion and is floodlit at night.

Panya Park Golf Club

There is water everywhere at this Ronald Fream-designed course, requiring accuracy rather than pure power. The clubhouse facilities are terrific.

President Country Club

An undulating and challenging course with superb greens and plenty of water to encourage accuracy. There is a very comprehensive clubhouse with accommodation.

Rajapruek Club

This 18-hole course is not far from the city centre and is nicely landscaped with a good assortment of bunkers and water hazards.

Thanont Golf View

This interesting layout from Robert McFarland makes players negotiate a large lake and some separate island greens.

Useful websites that detail courses include www.golfinthailand.com, www.thaigolfguide.com and www.thailandgolfcourses.com

characterised by gently undulating fairways and well-contoured greens. There's a delightful rural ambience embracing this lovely sporting retreat, located 40 minutes from the city centre scene. Almost without exception, golfers give the sporting haven two thumbs up, with the high rate of satisfaction due to its peaceful atmosphere, quality facilities and abundance of nature.

The most flower-festooned fairways are not to be found in Chiang Mai, however, but at the Rose Garden, a 7085-yard calm countryside golf course located an hour's drive beyond the buzz of Bangkok. Each hole of the Thai-owned, Thai-designed and Thai-managed golf getaway also has its own flower. A particular species was carefully selected to match the characteristics of each hole.

Another distinguishing feature is that the club has its own squad of some 400 well-trained female caddies who wear broad-brimmed coolie hats, yellow shirts and dark trousers. The "uniform" for a contingent of klong boys is not so formal. Better known as "Thai Crocodiles", these eager youngsters are dressed only in swimwear and are positioned near each of the Rose Garden's nine water hazards. Should your ball stray into the murky depths, an eagle-eyed



Left: Many of Thailand's golf course have lush surrounds

Below left: Gardeners at the Royal Hua Hin keep you amused even if you bogey the lovely 13th hole!



caddie will sing out *tok nam* (in the water), and before the ripples of the ball's wayward journey have subsided, a smiling klong boy has retrieved it and is racing towards you with the offender held high.

Many accolades have been bestowed on the Rose Garden. One of them, a silver medal awarded by America's *Golf Magazine*, places the layout in a lofty list of 'The World's 25 Best Golf Courses'.

The Rose Garden is a vibrant gem, but in a kingdom with more than 200 courses there are many outstanding playfields, including a sparkling jewel

on the increasingly popular holiday island of Samui. Before picking up a club and smacking the ball off the first tee at the Santiburi Samui Country Club, don't neglect to replenish your supply of golf balls. Chances are you'll need extras on a highly scenic playground that features more coconut palms than you have ever seen. Parked on a hillside on the northern coast of Koh Samui, the island's first golf course luxuriously weaves its way through an old coconut garden for 6932 yards.

Opening holes at this stunning course are played through the coconut forest, and then progress up the heavily wooded mountainside. A golf cart is a necessity to successfully navigate the steep slopes. Waterfalls, valleys and creeks further accentuate this course's demure beauty. The par

travelfacts

gettingthere

Thai Airways International has three flights a day linking Sydney with Bangkok, 12 flights a week from Melbourne and a daily departure from Brisbane. From Perth there are five flights a week to Bangkok which includes three services via the golf island of Phuket. Phone 1300 651 960 or visit www.thaiairways.com.au Other airlines that fly between Australia and Thailand include Emirates (phone 03 9940 7807 or visit www.emirates.com/au), Jetstar (phone 131 538 or visit www.jetstar.com.au), Qantas (phone 131 313 or visit www.qantas.com.au) and Singapore Airlines (phone 131 011 or visit www.singaporeair.com.au).

gettingaround

Contact travel agents for details on the Royal Orchid Holidays Golf in Thailand programme. Phone 1300 369 750 or visit www.thaiairways.com.au

furtherinformation

Tourism Authority of Thailand, phone 02 9247 7549 or visit www.tourismthailand.org

3 sixth hole, for instance, features both a natural waterfall and a 40-metre vertical drop to a generous green encircled by dense foliage.

A relative newcomer to Samui's sporting scene, this 18-hole championship challenge only came to fame when it was the prestigious venue for the 2006 Bangkok Airways Open. Nowadays this shinning star is well and truly a must-play destination for every savvy player venturing through the fresh fields of Thailand. •

Photography by Thomas E. King and Tourism Authority of Thailand