

26/12/2001

Spectacular and challenging

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BEING told that Shan-Shui Golf and Country Club is a truly stunning beauty won't satisfy your curiosity. You have to be there and experience it firsthand to appreciate its unique charm.

Shan-Shui, translated as mountain-water in Mandarin, is one of the very few golf courses in Asia endowed with "natural gifts".

Clearly, the aura of Shan-Shui is amplified by its two dominant features - Gunung Tinagat and Membalua River, the mountain standing guard like a giant custodian overlooking a winding river.

Opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Sept 21, 1997, the charming but highly challenging 18-hole golf course has continued to captivate all visitors.

The par-72, 6,644m layout designed by Neil Haworth, rated as the longest course in Malaysia, has become the pride of Sabah, and since then, has won numerous awards, including the best golf course in Asia.

In 1998, the club hosted the Sabah Masters and although most of the Asian PGA players were bedazzled by its beauty and difficulty, they had no hesitation in giving Shan-Shui the highest marks.

In fact, Thai pro Prayad Marksaeng set the course record of 65 during the Masters. Further accolades followed when two holes - the par-5 5th and the par-4 15th - were singled out for mention by the Hong Kong-based Asian Golf Monthly and the US-based Golf Magazine.

Spread over 167 ha, Shan-Shui, located just outside Tawau on the east coast of Sabah, was the creation of Datuk Kour Nam Ngum, a well-known Tawau businessman and qualified pharmacist.

Kour, chairman of a Malaysia-Singapore consortium that owns the club, was in two minds over what to do with the land until the late Datuk Alex Lee, captivated by the ambience, convinced him to develop it as a golf course.

Hence, Kour told Haworth from the Nelson and Haworth group to preserve as much of the natural terrain as possible in his layout for the course.

The number of medicinal trees and herbs were retained and labelled and the course continued to serve as an oasis for hornbills, eagles, otters, crocodiles and other animals.

With the layout following the contours of the land, golfers are given the luxury of testing their mettle against fairways bordered by a cocoa plantation, rubber trees, hills, valleys and alongside the ravines.

Kour, who is the club president and captain, has also given each of the 18 holes an identity, viz Borneo Special (Hole 3), Sulu Split (Hole 5), Fairway to Heaven (Hole 10), The Creek (Hole 15) etc, thus making a journey through Shan-Shui is a tale of discovery.

The course parades a mixture of suspense and adventure and water hazards come in different forms, as lakes, ponds, gentle streams or river gorges at 10 holes.

Numerous bunkers dot the landscape and either provide direction, especially on the dogleg holes, or threat to flailing drives or misguided approaches.

The Bermuda Tifdwarf greens are true and fast, providing a formidable challenge for those who reach in regulation, while some of the fairways are generously wide.

Three holes stand out on the front nine - the par-3 3rd, the par-5 5th and the par-4 6th.

An uninviting lake separates the 166-metre championship tee from the green at the 3rd, where an errant slice right will either see your ball in the jungle or in the water.

The 531m Sulu Split 5th, as the name implies, is a dogleg right that might tempt the adventurous over dense foliage. A three-wood to fairway on the left to set up an easier route to the green is probably a safer bet.

At the 392m 6th, the erratic player will be advised not to overshoot the green or slice it to the river on the left because the resident crocodile is known to have a healthy appetite for stray balls.

The well-documented 15th, measuring 382m, will be a sought-after hole on the back nine. This hole requires a three-wood or long iron from the tee to the elevated fairway to get a clear view of the green, to avoid your second shot from going for a wash in the stream on the right.

As you head back to the Borneo-styled clubhouse, which features a shingle roof made of belian wood, the par-4, 380m 18th offers a final obstacle to your tired limbs.

The direct approach to the green might be plain sailing to some but be careful with that second shot as a threatening lake looms in front of the green.

But even if you have had a bad 18, and lost more balls than you care to remember, most first-time golfers will leave Shan-Shui with a sense of satisfaction.

To borrow a phrase from an old vodka ad, the effect is shattering.