COURSES / TRAVEL

HIGHER STATE OF MIND

Religion provides people with a sense of spiritual well-being and inner peace. For the Khmer, this constituted a significant part of their lives, judging from the scale and intricacies of the magnificent Angkor Wat. The temple, regarded as one of the world’s largest religious buildings, was originally built as the state temple and capital city of the Khmer empire. Today, it plays a key role as well, representing Cambodia on its flag and generating tourism revenue for the country.

Perhaps, due to the rural nature of Siem Reap, the northwestern province of Cambodia has an air of calm tranquillity, much like the environs of a garden in a sacred temple or through the quiet passages of Angkor Wat. That same feeling of sanctity is exactly what you will get, while playing a round of golf at any of the three top courses in this area.

The Phokeethra Country Club received good doses of clout and credibility in recent years as it had the privilege of hosting the Johnnie Walker Cambodian Open on the Asian Tour. In the most recent installment, Thongchai Jaidee from Thailand lifted the trophy amidst rapturous cheers from the Cambodian crowd. (Today this would symbolise a timely détente between the two countries given the recent scuffles over a hallowed ground at the shared border.)

Thongchai’s 21-under total for the tournament, was hardly indicative of the course’s difficulty at Phokeethra Country Club. Major General Weygi Phetsuorak from V Golf Design designed the course. They have completed many projects around the region and are well adjusted to the topographies unique to this part of the world.

As it seems, the architect prefers to leave things as they are. Water is a dominant feature, with naturally occurring lakes and streams flanking the majority of the fairways. Needless to say, accuracy and careful course management is required to keep your balls out of the drink. For example, the par-16th requires you to carry over water twice. The course is difficult in that sense, but on the whole, it is a fair test. It does not have dramatic undulations and the fairways as well as greens are quite ample. So, a bit of misalignment can still give you a chance to recover.

For archaeological or history buffs, the Kulen Bridge, located near the short game practice area, is an ancient structure that was built in the 11th century. Symbolically the country uses it to represent the link between the past and the present. Judging from the way things are going, Phokeethra Country Club’s future is looking to be as successful as the glorious Khmer empire.

With regards to glorious and successful reigns — both in tournament play and course design — fever golfers can beat Nick Faldo and what he has achieved in the late eighties and early nineties. Angkor Golf Resort is the Englishman’s second foray into Southeast Asia after Eagle Ridge in the Philippines. The course in Siem Reap epitomises Faldo’s design philosophy of creating courses that are both playable and fair, equally challenging and rewarding.

Ample fairways seem to be Faldo’s way of encouraging lesser golfers into the game, as they can easily accommodate short drivers, diffused shots and the occasional mishit. However, elite players will have to tee-off accurately to avoid the water hazards and dramatic bunkers guarding the landing areas.

Speaking of bunkers, there seems to be a Sahara of them at the signature par-five 13th. Huge, elaborate sand traps occupy the majority of the fairway. As it is a par five, it can be a long, arduous journey to the greens if you find yourself in one (or several) of these hazards.
Having said that, the Angkor Golf Resort course is truly engaging and a real joy to play. Faldo has done an excellent job here, creating holes that rank high on memorability and playability. From an aesthetic point of view, it looks a lot neater compared to the more rustic Phokeethra Country Club. The maintenance is magnificent and done to championship standards all year round.

Other features include a 300-yard driving range that uses natural lawn and interestingly, a proper 19th hole that they label as “bottling hole” in their brochure. The clubhouse has a modern architecture that is pleasing to the eye, comfortable and has all the amenities you would expect from a well-run golf club.

The third and newest golf course in Siem Reap is the Siem Reap Lake Golf Resort. Opened since 2009, everything looks brand new and in optimal working condition.

At 7,396m, the golf course is considerably long, roughly 40m longer than Tanah Merah Country Club’s Garden Course. From the white tees, it can be rather harrowing, especially if you have just played the Angkor Golf Resort the day before - Siem Reap Lake Golf Resort is nearly 600 yards farther. That’s like an additional long par five.

As you play a round here, you’ll notice the expansively wide fairways and large greens. In addition, water is not really a factor, unless you have monster slices or hooks, or a gross misalignment problem. All that translates to a course that is well suited to the grip-it-and-rip-it bomber. For the resort golfer, the thrill of smashing it off the tee no doubt induces high levels of endorphin, but frustration will probably set in when fairway woods and hybrids are used a little too often for the approach.

However, just like Phokeethra Country Club and Angkor Golf Resort, the Siem Reap Lake Golf Resort is blanketed with serenity. The laid-back ambiance presents the perfect backdrop for 18 holes of escapism and peace. The luxurious clubhouse has copious amenities, with a service staff who are conversant in English and Korean – understandable given that the golf club is opened by KTC Leisure Co, a South Korean company with numerous infrastructural investments in Cambodia.

Apart from the tranquil environment, the great thing about Siem Reap’s triumvirate of golf clubs is that they offer three distinctly different golf experiences. You have Phokeethra Country Club, with its championship-level golf course as well as its rustic and historical charm. Then there is the Angkor Golf Resort, which has 16 beautiful, well-conditioned holes that are designed by Nick Faldo. Finally, the Siem Reap Lake Golf Resort, with its expansive fairways and greens.

You may receive a good amount of spirituality from the visits to the temples around Siem Reap. But, for the majority of us, there’s nothing more uplifting than a good (or even mediocre) round of golf. As American politician Adlai Stevenson said, “Some of us worship in churches, some in synagogues, some on golf courses.”

The only thing left to pray for, then, is good weather.