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ASIA



Java tees

Setting a course for Indonesia

Java tees

Among paddies and volcanoes, great golf courses

By Paul Spencer Sochaczewski

Java is home to 130 million people, making it one of the most densely populated places on Earth. The island is also home to 20 recently active volcanoes, making it the planet's most volatile large land area—and 107 golf courses, making it one of Asia's best, and least-appreciated, golf destinations.

The courses on Indonesia's most populous island, conceived by designers from Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer to Greg Norman and Robert Trent Jones Jr., roll next to paddy fields, provide magnificent views, and yes, can even be found on the flanks of steaming, sputtering volcanoes. One, Mount Merapi Golf, is also the home of the Mermaid Queen, the legendary consort of the influential sultan of Yogyakarta and the *susuhunan* of Solo.

Best of all, many of the finest courses are "semi-member" clubs that welcome visiting businesspeople and tourists during the week, when they are often refreshingly empty. (Walk-on guests are discouraged on weekends, though, when the courses are busy.) And they're relatively inexpensive—it's not uncommon on a weekday to pay less than \$30 for a greens fee and caddy for a round at one of the better courses in the Jakarta area.

And for those nongolf days, Java provides plenty of other things for a traveler to do, notes Zainal Soedjais, president of the Indonesian Golf Association, from nature and culture to heritage and art, not to mention food. (Think pristine rain forests, sultanates where courtly traditions and rituals still live, the 1,200-year old Buddhist temple of Borobudur, hand-crafted batik—and, of course, satay.)

With all this, why doesn't Java draw golfers the way, say, Thailand does?

Murdaya Widyawimarta, president director of the busy Pondok Indah golf course and chairman of the Indonesia Golf Course Owners Association, blames poor marketing of the sport by government tourist departments.

Officials in Indonesia have the wrong idea about golf, seeing it as a luxury, says Christine Wiradinata, executive director of Damai Indah Golf and Country Club. One sign: "Golf courses have to pay the same high tax rate as massage parlors and karaoke bars," she says. "We need to reposition golf to show how well-managed courses save nature, reduce global warming and employ thousands of people." These would be courses that, for example, introduce nature to otherwise barren land.

Whether despite or because of the sport's elitist image, some in Indonesia's growing middle class have picked up golf with enthusiasm. "There are some 100,000 active golfers in Indonesia, most of them living in Java," says England Rachman, executive secretary of the Indonesian Golf Association. "Young professionals have money, and they're exposed to golf on TV."

They're taking up a sport with a long history in Indonesia. Jakarta Golf Club, more often called Rawamangun, dates to 1872; the narrow, tree-lined layout in the middle of the city is where former President Suharto, the late Indonesian strongman, regularly played.

Today a golfer has a much wider choice. Following the advice of golfing friends in Indonesia, I set off on a quick tour of Java to play some of its most interesting courses. Some highlights:

Paul Spencer Sochaczewski is a Bangkok-based writer.



Jakarta-Bogor region

Within 60 kilometers of the noisy, congested, cosmopolitan capital of Jakarta you'll find 36 courses, some among the finest in Asia. The greatest concentration lies along the Jagorawi toll road, which connects Jakarta with Bogor, an hour to the south. Near Bogor, the topography becomes more hilly, and hence more interesting for golfers. Most Bogor-area courses offer stunning views of either Mount Gede or Mount Salak, the city's twin volcanoes. The city claims a global record for thunderstorms, averaging 322 annually over a stretch of several years early in the last century. The tally has been questioned, but odds are certainly pretty good that an afternoon round will be interrupted by a storm, so tee off in the morning.

Cengkareng Golf Club

Minutes from Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta international airport, this popular course has the clearest strategy for drawing golfers—male golfers, anyway—of any course in Jakarta. "Our girls are iconic," says Ian Roberts, the general manager. "Golfers like to be served by attractive women." They're in alluring color-coded outfits: waitresses in orange miniskirts, "welcome girls" in peach (to take your clubs from the car), reception clerks in red and caddies in blue and yellow.

Other courses on Java, such as Rainbow Hills and Sentul, have pursued a similar approach.

The course itself is flat, but with plenty of flowers and mature trees, and it's close enough to the sea to that there's usually a breeze. It's also one of the more expensive courses in Indonesia, about \$50 for a walk-in greens fee, including caddy charges.

☎ 62-21-5591-1111

Web: www.cengkarenggolfclub.com

Emeralda Golf Club

"Is that OB?" I asked after a nasty slice, employing the golf shorthand for "out of bounds."

"Yes. It's definitely 'Oh Beautiful,'" my caddy, Mulnia, replied.

Emeralda is one of dozens of well-managed clubs along the Jagorawi highway. The Plantation course is a rather ordinary nine-hole Jack Nicklaus layout (the 1997 Asian financial crisis halted construction on the second nine), but the two nine-hole Arnold Palmer courses—the River Course and the Lake Course—are pretty and challenging, with contoured fairways.

Added bonus: The course sells good-quality "experienced" balls for a fixed price of about \$2.50 for 10, a bargain.

☎ 62-21-875-9019

Web: www.emeraldagolfclub.com



Damai Indah Golf & Country Club

Rancamaya Golf & Country Club

An all-day deluge prevented my being able to play Rancamaya. The course, designed by Ted Robinson, is certainly pretty to look at, rich in vegetation that attracts wildlife. That's just part of its environmental appeal: Water-treatment systems convert "gray water"—waste water from sources other than toilets—into potable water, chemicals are rarely used and an extensive recycling program is in place.

Rancamaya's approach is particularly welcome in this hilly region, a case history of how not to manage watersheds—deforestation and conversion of agricultural land to build homes and resorts have exacerbated seasonal flooding in Jakarta. ☎ 62-251-242-282
Web: www.rancamayaestate.com

Damai Indah Golf & Country Club

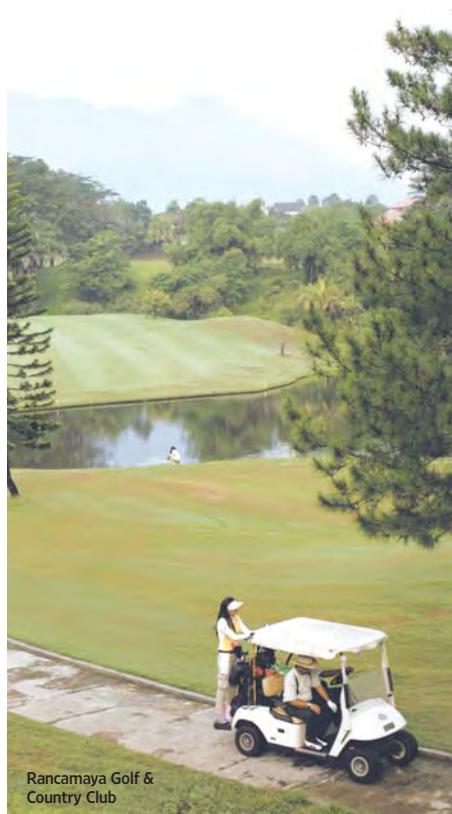
Damai Indah offers two courses, about 40 minutes apart from one another: Bumi Serpong Damai (BSD), designed by Jack Nicklaus, and Pantai Indah Kapuk (PIK), designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr.

Courses in and near the city, like these two and Pondok Indah, can act as green lungs for those parts of the metropolis, as well as de facto nature reserves. A bird census in 2007 indicated that 56 species live in or visit the BSD course, almost twice as many as when the course opened in 1992. This is what environmentalists call "restoration ecology"—the BSD course was built on a disused sand quarry.

BSD was the first of seven Jack Nicklaus-designed courses in Indonesia. Located west of Jakarta in Tangerang, it's open, with wide fairways, lots of sand and very undulating, newly renovated greens. I particularly enjoyed the par 4, 292-meter 6th hole, which overlooks the Cisadane River, here relatively clean and fringed by vegetation.

The PIK course is among the busiest in Indonesia, with some 6,000 rounds played each month. It's a walking course—no carts—and nine holes have lights for tropical evenings, when the sun sets around 6 p.m.

☎ 62-21-537-0285
Web: www.damaiindah-golf.com



Rancamaya Golf & Country Club

Central Java

The island's middle-section contains the royal city of Yogyakarta, considered, along with neighboring Solo, the heart of Javanese culture. Yogyakarta is the better-known to visitors, trailing only Bali in popularity among tourists. A handful of good golf courses can be found outside Bandung (in West Java province), Yogyakarta, Semarang and Cirebon, amid volcanoes that spew whiffs of smoke and sulfur.

Merapi Golf

This 6,354-meter, par-72 setup, designed by five-time British Open champion Peter Thomson, is set in the foothills of Mount Merapi, near the royal cities of Yogyakarta and Solo. It is the home course of Sultan Hamengkubuwono X of Yogyakarta.

Among the holes on this attractive mountain course, the 17th looks like just another well-maintained example. But there is a powerful cultural tale attached, as I wrote about on a trip there in 2006. My caddie that day, Murwani, who like many Indonesians uses only one name, related a tale of having seen a few years back a brown and black snake, perhaps seven meters long and as big around as "a man's thigh," resting on a flat rock in the pond flanking the hole. Among the other locals who said they'd also seen the snake was one who reported it had had the head and body of a woman, sort of like a reptilian mermaid. Their conclusion was that it was an avatar of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, the Mermaid Queen of the Southern Ocean—in Javanese cosmology, an ancestor of the current sultan.

When Mount Merapi gurgled a minor eruption on the day construction of the golf course began in 1994, the omen-appreciative Javanese took it as a sign that Ratu Kidul was blessing the venture. And none of Merapi's regular volcanic burps since then has done any damage to the course. If you need more proof, it's said rain never falls here when the sultan is playing, even on the cloudiest, most threatening days. As soon as he gets into his car to leave, though, the skies can open up.

While an encounter with the Mermaid Queen is unlikely, all golfers can appreciate this layout. On my visit a few years ago I particularly enjoyed the fourth hole, starting with the view from the tee. On a fair day it's about as Javanese as you can get, postcard-perfect Mount Merapi rising behind the elevated green. The hole itself is an uphill par 3, 145 meters to that green, which is three-tiered and steeply canted. When my seven iron landed on the top level, Murwani warned the downhill putt would be "slippery." She was right: The ball slithered some three meters past the hole, leaving a tough putt coming back. But I sank it for a satisfying save of par.

☎ 62-274-896-176
Web: www.merapigolf.com



Emerald Golf Club

Dimas Ardian for The Wall Street Journal (Rancamaya); Damai Indah; Richard Castka (Emerald)



The Taman Dayu Club

TRIP PLANNER

Cities with direct flights to Surabaya include Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur; there are direct flights to Jakarta from those three cities and many more, including Bangkok, Tokyo, Seoul and Taipei. There are frequent domestic flights between Jakarta, Yogyakarta and Surabaya, all roughly an hour from one another by air.

Gridlock in greater Jakarta challenges even the most zen-like resident. When heading south to courses in the Bogor region, or west to those around Tangerang, leaving central Jakarta before 6 a.m. should get you to your destination within an hour. Taxis are cheap and plentiful; Bluebird and its ritzier Silverbird brand are recommended.

Some golf courses, such as Finna in East Java, are part of resorts that offer comfortable accommodation. Here are some choices elsewhere:

JAKARTA

Hotel Nikko

Jalan MH Thamrin 59
Jakarta 10350
☎ 62-21-230-1122
Web: www.nikkojakarta.com

Jakarta is rich in good hotels—and in these recessionary times also with good deals. The Nikko is near the Hotel Indonesia roundabout, the part of town where I like to stay. Ask for a room in the renovated Tower Wing.

Hotel Indonesia Kempinski

Jalan MH Thamrin 1
☎ 62-21-2358-3800
Web: www.kempinski-jakarta.com

A swank renovation of the city's most iconic hotel, whose Ramayana Bar was featured in the film "The Year of Living Dangerously."

Sheraton Bandara

Near Soekarno-Hatta Airport
☎ 62-21-559-7777
Web: www.sheraton.com

Conveniently located for the courses near the airport—it's right next door to Cengkareng Golf Club—and to the west.

BOGOR

Hotel Salak The Heritage

Jalan Ir. H. Juanda No. 8
☎ 62-251-837-3111
Web: www.hotelsalak.co.id

YOGYAKARTA

Phoenix Hotel Yogyakarta

Jalan Jenderal Sudirman 9
☎ 62-274-566-617
Web: www.accorhotels.com

SURABAYA

Grand Mercure Mirama

Jalan Raya Darmo 68-78
☎ 62-31-562-3000
Web: www.mercuresurabaya.com

Sheraton Surabaya

Jalan Embong Malang 25-31
☎ 62-31-546-8000
Web: www.sheraton.com

East Java

There are a handful of courses in Surabaya, whose three million people make it Indonesia's second-biggest city, but for much more enjoyable golfing, drive an hour out of town to Pasuruan, home to Finna Golf & Country Club Resort and the Taman Dayu Club.

The two courses sit amid three volcanoes, and with their mature trees, diverse vegetation and relatively light use of chemicals attract birds and animals only infrequently found outside such natural areas. Other pleasant courses can be found in the hill resort of Malang.

Finna Golf & Country Club Resort

Fanny Dewi, general manager of Finna Golf & Country Club Resort, has no trouble explaining what golfers might find appealing about Java: "The golf is good. It's not expensive. Our tradition is to treat people with warmth and respect, so a visitor gets pampered."

I find something satisfying about playing near functioning rice fields in sight of looming volcanoes. I particularly enjoyed the 184-meter, par 3 fifth hole, with an elevated tee and a carry over paddy fields, which you treat as a water hazard if you're unfortunate enough to land one there. The 472-meter, par 5 10th hole is an intriguing double dogleg requiring two blind shots; be careful of the stream in front of the green.

This is a well-run operation—from the moment I first spoke to the telephone operator, who was knowledgeable, competent and fluent in English, I sensed that Finna is on top of its game. Visitors can stay in the resort's comfortable cottages—mine had its own pool. The restaurant is good, and there's even a grass tennis court.

☎ 62-343-634-888

Web: www.finnagolf.com

The Taman Dayu Club

The owners of Taman Dayu aren't shy about promoting Golf Digest's 2005 recognition of their course as one of the 50 best outside the U.S. And I can report having a very enjoyable round on this Jack Nicklaus Signature Course. Even the rental clubs were good, not a sure thing at many Asian courses.

I particularly like the par-4, 395-meter 5th hole. A diverse agricultural area (rice paddies, terraces of maize, mixed cropping of fruit trees) intrudes on the fairway on the right, putting a premium on an accurate tee shot. Behind the green soars the 3,156-meter-high cone of Mount Welirang, one of the area's five semiactive—that is, quiet for the moment—volcanoes.

☎ 62-343-633-411

Web: www.tamandayu.com



Finna Golf & Country Club Resort

THE COURSES