



Rebirth of a Nation



Thirty years after the last shot was fired,
Vietnam is rebuilding and reinventing itself,
with golf a big part of what's new

| by SCOTT RESCH



On my first night in Vietnam, I sat in the rooftop bar of the Caravelle Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City—what used to be Saigon—staring across the dark cityscape at the silhouette of another rooftop.

“That was where that famous helicopter landed,” said my host, James Sullivan, an American who has spent most of the past 15 years in Vietnam. “There, and not the American Embassy. During the fall of Saigon.”

He didn’t have to explain anymore. Although I was born around the time that the war in Vietnam was ending, I remember the photo. Who doesn’t? The line of refugees on a ladder; the single helicopter, perched precariously; the American pilot leaning out to help.

It was one of the last images from the first war to come into our living rooms every night. For nearly 20 years, we saw the jungles, the young soldiers, the old generals. The fighting over there that led to the fighting over here. No one won; everybody lost.



Ho Chi Minh City (left) and its elegantly restored Caravelle Hotel (above)

It didn’t take long for me to see that everyone who lived here no longer thought about the war—and thought that those of us who did were missing the larger story.



Vietnam. For many Americans it is still the name of a chapter in our history, not a country.

In this new world, we have the ability—no, the necessity—to forgive our former enemies, if not totally forget. Look at China, Russia, Japan, Germany. We have to make peace; the world has to move on. Heal old wounds. Become friends, even allies.

But Vietnam?

Last fall, I went east to untangle the war and the geography; to see one of the world’s fastest-growing markets; to try my hands at a clutch of ballyhooed golf courses.

Golf? Of course. In those same countries, it is the new currency; a way to attract foreign investment and investors; a capitalist tool helping to build a new economy.

Shortly after my arrival in the sun-splashed town of Phan Thiet, after stowing my bags in a spacious, hardwood-floor bungalow at Ocean Dunes Resort & Golf Club, after playing 18 fun holes on its Nick Faldo-designed course right next to the tranquil South China Sea, and after taking a swim in the resort’s beachfront pool, I stood with a cold bottle of Tiger Beer on the clubhouse veranda, overlooking the course’s flower-fronted practice green.

I asked Andrew Legge, a transplanted New Yorker and COO of the company that owns the club, a question that had been bothering me all day: What could be done for someone who wanted to experience this slice of paradise but didn’t want to spend four hours on a train from Ho Chi Minh City, the closest metropolis?

“Easy,” Legge said, and pointed at a large patch of fresh-cut grassland a couple hundred yards away. “That’s the driving range. We land a helicopter right there.”

I looked beyond the tree line souging with palm fronds to the beach, not far from the American airbase where Tiger Woods’ father was once stationed, and listened for the echoes of choppers. It was absolutely quiet. I watched the sun set and had another beer.

The next morning, I made my way past immaculate tropical gardens, through the resort’s remodeled hotel lobby, and onto the reception driveway, where 11 shiny motorcycles with side-

cars were parked like soldiers in perfect formation and being revved by just as many men wearing vintage, half-faced helmets.

Some of the drivers were French, others Vietnamese. All were affiliated with the nearby Princess d'Annam Resort & Spa, another high-end property, set to open this spring. It will cater to guests who insist on personal butlers to attend their stay.

One of the riders was general manager Gilles Poggi, a Corsican who started amassing the World War II-era Russian Ural motorcycles in the mid-1990s, when he moved to Vietnam from the West Indies. The well-traveled bike collector led a day-long journey that included rice-paddy plains, smiling schoolchildren, burning cornstalks, and high-land waterfalls. The trip ended in Dalat, a former French-occupied hill station now bustling with natives trying to capitalize on the fertile land, ideal for growing the coffee beans that contribute to the rich aroma in the air.



Clockwise from top left: Press Club restaurant in Hanoi; a bit of old Hanoi; Dalat Palace hotel; Vietnam Golf & Country Club

“A spell is what we’re trying to induce,” said Poggi, who will offer the sidecar excursion to guests as a way of standing out in a competi-

tive environment. “We’re building a foundation on the ability to indulge whims. And we have to. Vietnam is changing.”

“Vietnam is changing” became a mantra repeated by locals and foreigners involved in, and hoping to capitalize on, the transformation. And it’s not as if they’re making it up. Take Dalat: Conceived as a European resort in the early part of the last century, it has gone from a site of colonial ambitions to a town teeming with buzzing mopeds. Motorcycles and mopeds are everywhere in Vietnam, a sign of the country’s rapid economic growth rate, which in 2005 was second only to China’s.



The promise of prosperity has induced large-scale events. In November, Vietnam hosted hundreds of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit delegates, including President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The most popular topic from bus stops to beer huts is membership in the World Trade Organization, which was officially granted in January. The expected result is increased investment, more change, and more tourists. And that means more golfers.

Vietnam appears to be ready. Prior to the fall of Saigon in 1975, there were just two courses: The Golfe Club de Saigon out by Tan Son Nhat Airport in Ho Chi Minh City; and the Dalat Palace Golf Club. Built more than 80 years ago, the latter track served mainly as the private playground of Emperor Bao Dai. In 1966, Billy Casper, who had just won the U.S. Open at Olympic,



played there while on a USO tour. He putted on greens of sand and soil; the greens we putted on were perfect bent grass.

Right now, Vietnam has about a dozen courses, each at least on par with a good American resort. The best of the clubs open today is Chi Linh Star Golf & Country Club, two hours east by car from Hanoi, which since the end of the war has been the official capital of the united Vietnam; it is the cultural capital as well, and in its back streets it is still possible to see glimpses of an earlier time. Chi Linh hosted the 2004 Carlsberg Asian Masters, which attracted a field that included former U.S. Open champion Corey Pavin.

You don't need to be a pro to play well at Chi Linh, but it helps. And even then, red numbers are no guarantee. Just ask Lars Holden, the club's general manager. In '04, he watched as some of the world's best players crumbled under the barrage of hazards and missed the 7-over-par cut line.

Another challenge is in the making at Chi Linh.

Construction is under way on a second 18—the first nine to be completed in March and the second nine slated for 2008. The goal is to create an inimitable golf community, right down to the modern, Battlestar Gallactica-looking clubhouse that already presides over the property, as well as the 20 or so four- to six-bedroom villas that are being erected along the 18th fairway.

"All we're doing is accommodating demand," Holden explained between bites of a post-round steak sandwich. A moment later, he reached for his cellphone, ringing for what seemed like the millionth time that afternoon, and he was up again, tending to yet another piece of business.

Not far from Chi Linh, in the infamous Gulf of Tonkin—where alleged torpedo attacks in 1964 led President Johnson to announce an escalation in the war effort—sits one of the world's

greatest natural wonders: Ha Long Bay. The eerie, emerald green water is bejeweled with more than 1,000 karsts—limestone formations riddled with caves, topped by jungle growth, and mythically created by dragons.

The best way to absorb this geological marvel is aboard the *Emeraude*, a replica of a Colonial-era paddle wheeler outfitted with high-backed wicker chairs, brass fittings, and fiberglass kayaks. Kurt

Walter, a worldly Swiss who has served as the ship's general manager for three years, loves his new home.

"It is the ultimate office," Walter said while sipping a citrus cocktail and gazing at the monoliths that had become dark shapes in the thick night sky. "I wake up to heaven, and work feels like holiday. It is the most special place on the planet."

With its 36 elegantly appointed cabins and two luxury suites, the *Emeraude* is the only upscale vessel that allows overnight stays in the bay. But options are on the horizon. In October, the hip Life Resorts chain is scheduled to launch its sixth up-market "experience" in Vietnam—a fleet of 22 deluxe boats

aimed at couples seeking the ultimate in privacy and service: Each craft will carry a five-man crew (captain, chef, spa therapist, tour guide, and maid) yet sleep just two guests.

The offering is in line with the other Life Resorts properties, most of which are located in isolated areas of the country. The exception is in Hoi An, a town near Danang, where hangars that

The best way to see Ha Long Bay (opposite) is on the *Emeraude* (below). Golf at Dalat Palace (left) and Chi Linh Star (bottom).





Hoi An, near Danang, is noted for cooking and a Life Resort (above), built on a former U.S. Army base.



Getting There

United Airlines is the only U.S. airline with flights to Vietnam, flying into Ho Chi Minh City as continuations of daily non-stop service to Hong Kong from San Francisco and Chicago.

once housed American aircraft sit empty and a seashore that was home to the famous R&R facility “China Beach” fronts plush, new hotels. The resort, built on an old U.S. Army installation, rests on the banks of the placid Thu Bon River and is within walking distance of narrow streets with shops specializing in tailor-made clothing.

This town is renowned for food, notably at the Red Bridge Restaurant, which also offers classes in local cuisine. And at the Life Resort, chef Dang Ba Cuong is becoming well known for innovation in the kitchen. On my final night, the 31-year-old put together a meal at Senses Restaurant that belied his youth: king prawns coated with rice flakes; turmeric-marinated chicken with chopped garlic, lemongrass, and fresh *ngô* leaves; and homemade coconut ice cream served in an ice bowl shaped like a water drop. Afterward, he abandoned the kitchen for a moment to share his philosophy.

“Eating should be an experience,” he said, “not a necessity.”

In Vietnam today, experience is everywhere. When Senator John McCain’s Skyhawk was shot down by a missile in 1967, he was confined to a prison that American POWs commonly referred to as the “Hanoi Hilton.” Today, a luxury hotel and office development called Hanoi Towers occupies that infamous plot of land. Although one corner was preserved as a museum, there is little indication of what occurred there less than four decades ago.

Jeff Puchalski, a Californian who has lived in Vietnam for more than a decade and is vice chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam, said the spot’s drastic transformation is just further evidence that “the people of this country want to move forward.”

The Caravelle Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City oozes that attitude too. Nearing its 50th birthday and recently restored, the establishment that once served as a perch for Western correspondents covering the war now prides itself on having dedicated staff members who receive weekly training in English, with other members being recruited specifically to handle inquiries in other major foreign languages.

“They want to do it, they want to learn,” said director of sales and marketing Sheena Shee. “It is part of a commitment they have to helping us create a hotel experience unlike anywhere else in Vietnam.” The hotel also has a Japanese-style spa and a casino.

On the city’s outskirts, that same level of service is the goal of the Vietnam Golf & Country Club, which has come a long way from its first days, when bomb craters peppered the property and warning signs read “Traces of War.” The complex now has 36 holes of golf—18 designed by Lee Trevino—as well as caddies who offer a towel or bottle of water between shots. As the climate is always hot and humid, you are well advised to take them both.

More than 25 courses are in various stages of planning or construction around the country. Architect Ronald Fream is at work on a course near Phan Thiet

called Sea Links, intended to remind well-traveled golfers of classic experiences in Scotland and Ireland (minus the bitter temperatures, of course). And the first strictly private golf club in Vietnam, Van Tri Golf Club, near Hanoi, has nine holes finished with the second nine due to open this spring. There will be 185 villas on the property, and the club recently signed a catering deal with the Press Club in Hanoi—one of the most prestigious dining venues in Vietnam.

Whether these advancements will put Vietnam on the world golf map remains to be seen. But one thing’s for sure: The country is well on its way to altering the image it’s been living with since that last helicopter departed. Three decades later, those days are gone: The ones here now promise free trade, fantastic luxuries, and infinite possibilities.

“The word is out,” confirmed Barry Israel, chairman of Danao International Holdings, which owns Ocean Dunes. “Vietnam is a country now, not a war or a state of mind.”