

# THE RIGHT CLUB



*The Harbour Plaza Golf Club Dongguan offers great golf and an idyllic lakeside lifestyle.*

*By Mark Caldwell.*



Golf has famously been described as “a good walk spoiled”, but few players would agree with Mark Twain’s wry assessment of the game. Even on the days when things don’t go according to plan, most players count a round of golf as “a good walk made more interesting.”

Though club golfers generally play the same course every week, each round is a new adventure. The path walked, the shots made, the character of the covey, the cut of the greens and fairways, the nature of the breeze and, most of all, the intangible brew of mind and matter that determines a player’s “form” — these elements all conspire to frame the escapade.

When a golfer plays a course for the first time, his sense of adventure is heightened.

THE LUXURIOUS CLUBHOUSE AND 27-HOLE, 10,667-YARD GOLF COURSE ARE THE CENTREPIECE OF THIS 7,000-ACRE PROPERTY.





## THE GOLF ACADEMY

Conveniently close to the main clubhouse, the Harbour Plaza Golf Academy has a 300-yard open driving range, 26 covered Astroturf bays, natural grass tees, a generous practice putting green, uneven lies, bunkers and target greens. With night lighting and a food and beverage service, it caters to a golfer's every need.

Under the direction of veteran Golf Professional Martin Lai, beginners and experienced players alike are guided towards playing better, more enjoyable golf. The Academy incorporates dedicated teaching bays with full-length mirrors, there's an air-conditioned classroom, instruction videos, teaching aids and video technology which enables students to see footage of their progress.

The Academy offers free introductory classes to Members and their spouses while non-members are also welcome to participate for a fee.

With dedicated clinics for children, women and men, there is no faster way to learn and develop your game.




benefit from his instruction and advice.

To a large degree the Golf Club environment is defined by the individual personalities of both its Members and its staff. The Harbour Plaza has brought together a group of professionals with tremendous collective experience, expertise and a deep-rooted "feel" for the game. "Our success comes from our team's commitment to customer service, quality of product, and dedication to being the best," says Kurt. "Every staff member is committed to this and this is why we are successful."

### AFTER HOURS

At the Hole-in-One bar and lounge, which has an open-air terrace with views across the Golf Course, Members and their guests can relax, have a drink, and watch sport on TV. The lounge also has dozens of magazines and books on its shelves, from Sam Snead's *The Game I Love* to John Feinstein's *The Majors*.

This young Golf Club is already building a noble tradition. On the wall, the hole-in-one list contains a half dozen Members' names. The first ace was scored on November 7, 1999; the most recent in January. A small piece of Club history was made on that November day when a shot from the 24th tee sent the ball rolling into the cup. As the list grows longer, that milestone will take on a deeper significance. In time, perhaps the son or daughter of one of these first Members will also achieve a hole-in-one, thereby adding another stitch to the Harbour Plaza's proud tapestry.

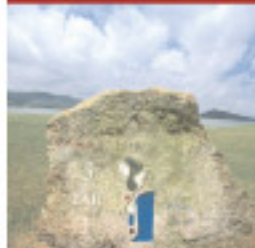
Like the young saplings that ring the course, the Harbour Plaza Golf Club Dongguan has the pedigree and resources to grow strong. The tone has been set; the foundations laid with care. Devotees of the game appreciate the importance of club selection, and Members of the Harbour Plaza are united in their opinion that this is indeed the right club. 

**Location:** Midway between Shenzhen and Guangzhou, near the town of Hou Jie.  
**Getting there from Hong Kong:** The Turbo Cat Ferry (travel time: one hour) departs from the China Hongkong City Ferry Terminal (Kowloon) to Fu Yong Ferry Terminal (PRC) from where there is a courtesy bus (travel time: 30 minutes).  
**By shuttle bus:** There are several pickup points in Hong Kong as well as from Fu Yong

Ferry Terminal. Players can book the shuttle bus up to two weeks in advance.  
**Bookings and information:** The booking office is open seven days per week except for PRC holidays. Members can book by telephone (86 769) 581-8080 (Club) or (852) 2122-9898 (Hong Kong office), or over the Internet at [harbourplazagolfclub.com](http://harbourplazagolfclub.com). There is also an online weather information service.







#### The Course

A total of 27 holes incorporating three distinct 9-hole courses — The Lake course, Valley Course and Lychee Course — offer three

unique 18-hole combinations. Total length is 10,667 yards with a network of cart paths. There is one refreshment kiosk per 9 holes as well as rain shelters at key points.

#### Grasses

Fairways and tees — Bermuda 419.  
Greens — Bermuda Tifdwarf.  
Rough — Bermuda Jackpot and Love Grass.

create houses that are in balance with the environment and which will contribute to the overall community."

The Lakeside development comprises 198 individual reinforced steel-framed homes with spacious gardens and uninterrupted views across the water. As the community evolves, decisions will be made on the need to add more houses, golf holes or other facilities residents may require. The Company has thus far utilised only 25% of its 7,000-acre holding. In the future, Members and their guests may be able to take advantage of conference amenities, while shops, family recreational facilities and schools may also be developed.

"Our long-term view is to promote a quality residential development and facilities, and to promote the game of golf the way it should be played — in more idyllic surroundings rather than in a factory-style environment as many golf clubs have tended to do," says Kurt. "We want our Members to have a real golfing experience, we want them to know each other, be involved and feel part of the community."

#### EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE

In a fast-paced world in which many clubs maximise their operational revenue through cart hire and shorter playing times, it's a luxury for players to be able to walk the course. While Members can opt to use golf carts, at the Harbour Plaza Golf Club they are not mandatory. Little touches like this make a huge difference to the overall experience.

"Exceptional Personalised Service is our operating philosophy," says Kurt. "We try to be very attentive in catering for every Member's need. It's something we don't just say, it's something we try to apply. So the team is vitally important."

To this end the facility employs highly-trained staff, including a Member Relations Team that provides person-

alised attention to every detail for its Members. When a dark cloud threatens during our round, course marshals come by to offer umbrellas or a ride back to the clubhouse. At the end of our game we are handed refreshing chilled towels by smiling staff. Our caddies ensure our clubs are in good order. Golf shoes are taken away for cleaning while we shower and change. There's the option of taking a steam bath, Jacuzzi or sauna.

Back in the Gallery Restaurant we enjoy cold refreshments, order from the extensive lunch menu and, through the windows, observe players finishing their rounds. For me, the experience has been a very "good walk" indeed, and I look forward to the next one.

#### TEAM SPIRIT

On day two I play a round with Golf Operations Director Tim Shaver. The American has a wealth of golfing experience and he carves up the "Lychee Course" with the authority and finesse of a hardened campaigner. The dramatic par-5 23rd, named Double Delight, is a great example of the "easy bogey, tough par" concept of golf design and is one of the Harbour Plaza's "signature" holes. It plays twice over water when the golfer takes the conservative route, but Tim opts for the "high risk, high reward" approach and hits the green in two. He talks me through the nuances of each hole and it is an education to observe how this remarkable course can reward or punish an expert player.

Next up is a round with another expert — Martin Lai, who is in charge of the Golf Academy. Martin started his career as a caddy. During our round he shows why he rose through the ranks to become one of the first generation of Hong Kong Chinese to turn pro. Over the years, he has helped tailor the swings of countless players, and most Members at some stage

THE PRO SHOP STOCKS EQUIPMENT AND ACCESSORIES WHILE CLUB-TRAINED CADDIES CAN OFFER HELPFUL ADVICE AROUND THE COURSE.



## UNCOMMON GROUND

One of the joys of golf is the opportunity to interact with the environment. But few players appreciate the enormous effort that goes into keeping a golf course in pristine condition, or of the disasters nature can unleash.

Chris Norton has the mammoth task of ensuring that the Harbour Plaza Golf Course is as good as it can be. The 250-acre course is vulnerable to the perils of floods, droughts, pestilence and disease. Norton, a Turf Management graduate of top US school Michigan State University, must apply his substantial scientific knowledge to ensure that it thrives.

Norton manages 80 grounds staff, 59 of whom are dedicated to looking after the golf course. They ensure that the 27 fairways (some 10,667 yards) are regularly mowed. Every morning the greens must be cut to a precise length, ranging between 3.5 and 4.5 mm, depending on the season. A team of mechanics keeps the mowers and other machines running. Sand bunkers must be raked and replenished, divots filled, turf watered, trees pruned, weeds routed and pin placements changed. The cycle never ends.

Dongguan's bountiful climate presents specific challenges. Some courses must survive in arid climes and thus need a lot of watering, but at the Harbour Plaza the challenge is more likely to be an excess of water. The rainy season can wreak havoc. Too much rain and lack of sunlight can prevent photosynthesis and cause the growing process to shut down. The water quality is so pure that it robs the soil of nutrients, which must be replaced. In the dry season the course consumes a staggering 220-250 cubic metres of water per day, piped from the course reservoir.

As with all courses, there are also constant threats from insects, weeds and disease. From June through to September, for example, army worms can march across the grass, leaving a trail of devastation. Mole crickets are another worry. These flying creatures feed on grass roots and dig tunnels under the turf. When numbers become too high, action must be taken to prevent disaster. Grass is vulnerable to many diseases. Most won't do much damage, but when conditions are right a green can be destroyed overnight.

"Weeds, defined as 'plants out of place', are the biggest problem of all," says Norton. "In most environments weeds grow in cycles, but in this climate they grow all year round."

Norton pays very close attention to safe environmental practices. The course is managed according to stringent Integrated Pest Management (IPM) procedures. "If we have a problem, we will not just go out and spray. We will wait until a threshold is reached before we take action. Then we will choose the most effective, safest treatments possible."

The grounds maintenance facility has a dedicated "spill area" where insecticides or weed killers are mixed. "When we mix chemicals, the fresh water drains are closed to ensure that no toxins enter the water system," Norton explains.

The course is already a haven for various bird species and other creatures. There are fish in the waterways and a few reptiles in the rough. In time Norton hopes to introduce other wildlife — swans or ducks perhaps — but there are no plans for an alligator.





My first view of the Harbour Plaza Golf Club Dongguan is from the window of the Club courtesy bus. Our half-hour journey from the Fu Yong Ferry Terminal has taken us past the industrial developments that drive prosperity in the region, through the town of Hou Jie and on into the lush south China countryside. We drive through the Club gates to the reception area and are greeted by smart, uniformed staff. Our bags are whisked away while we are shown into the Gallery Restaurant for refreshments. The trip from Hong Kong has taken just 90 minutes.

**ON COURSE**

To find out more about this golfing jewel, I'd been invited by General Manager Kurt Michelsen to experience the Club first hand and, as most golfers would attest, there's no better place to have a "meeting" than on the golf course itself. The format is well suited to conversation, demanding moments of intense concentration for each stroke interspersed with periods of relaxation — time to stroll, talk and enjoy the environment. (Who else but a golfer studies the slope of a hill or the cut of the grass so intently? And where else is the air so fresh?)

In radiant sunshine we approach the first tee of the Lake Course — named Lychee Start — a par-4 that is bisected by a stream. My swing is somewhat agricultural and results in an unimpressive first shot. But the handicap system enables the very best practitioners to enjoy a round with ordinary mortals and still be competitive. Kurt hits a blistering drive. His ball touches down some 250-plus metres away on the soft green fairway. Our caddies acknowledge his effort — "good shot" and off we go.

As with his game, so too with his job — Kurt has very high standards. It is his mission to raise every aspect of this young Golf Club development to superlative levels — to create and maintain a deep-rooted culture of quality and service.

After only two years in operation the facility is a marvel. Designed by Robert Trent Jones II, the 27-hole, 10,667-yard modern masterpiece is bejeweled with clear lakes and silky greens, and textured with groves of lychee trees. With the contours and character of a classic, it is already rated as one of southern China's premier championship courses.

We play a few holes then reach a high point on the course. As we line up our putts we enjoy panoramic views in all directions. The clubhouse is a long way off, fronted by undulating fairways, and a large pond whose centre-piece is an animated five-metre-high fountain.


To one side is the great glassy sweep of Hwang Gang Lake. Across a fairway, beyond an explosion of wild flowers, is the Laguna Verona residential development.

**QUALITY DEVELOPMENT**

Set on the shore of the lake, the 431-unit Laguna Verona Phase I Harbour Plaza Golfers' Villas have been developed as an integral element of the Golf Club environment. The first phase has been fully subscribed and a second phase, "The Lakeside", will go on the market soon.

While individuals can join the Golf Club for a fee, the core Membership are Laguna Verona homeowners who have bought into a facility which, with its leafy lanes and lakefront vistas, offers them a refreshing antidote to the high-rise lifestyles of Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

Owners of these homes may enjoy membership of the Golf Club as well as access to the Residents' Club, which

**THE RESIDENTS' CLUB BOASTS A RESTAURANT, TWO POOLS, GYMNASIUM, SOLARIUM, TABLE TENNIS, TENNIS, BILLIARDS, SQUASH, BASKETBALL, BADMINTON, A GOLF SIMULATOR, AND A CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUND.**

boasts a restaurant, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, gymnasium, solarium, table tennis, tennis, billiards, squash, basketball, badminton, a golf simulator, and a children's playground.

In a highly competitive golf market, parent company Hutchison Whampoa has paid careful attention to developing and maintaining the right strategy.

"The manufacturing boom in southern China has led to some 60 golf courses being built in the region in a relatively short time," Kurt explains. "Unfortunately, many clubs cannot sustain full memberships and so can't afford to close their doors to non-members. They have gone away from the original intent, which was to be private and exclusive. As a result, some existing members feel shortchanged."

"Anyone wanting to join a golf club should weigh up the commitment of its management. Will this club continue to provide the same level or enhance the level of ser-

vice during the period of membership? Will the club be around in 25 years?"

"Hutchison is committed to ensuring that the value of memberships is maintained. That's why we don't allow non-members to come in. We are totally committed to ensuring that when you make an investment with us you benefit not just in terms of enjoying the facility, but also that the investment doesn't decline. There are very few clubs in southern China where the value of memberships has not declined. At Harbour Plaza Golf Club we've been very tough on maintaining our exclusivity and therefore the value of our membership."

**BUILDING A COMMUNITY**

"Some golf housing developments can be described as 'a lot of little boxes,'" Kurt adds, "but our development is modelled on those in North America. As we move into the next phase and into future phases, we're determined to

**LAGUNA VERONA INCORPORATES 431 EUROPEAN-STYLE VILLAS AND A RESIDENTS' CLUBHOUSE SET IN A SHADY, WATERFRONT ENVIRONMENT. THE PHASE TWO DEVELOPMENT COMPRISES 198 DELUXE NORTH AMERICAN-STYLED HOMES SCHEDULED FOR COMPLETION IN PHASES UNTIL 2002.**