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Golf in South Korea: A game unlike any other

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By: **Beth Ann Nichols** | February 9, 2017
12:07 pm

Driverless golf cart in South ...



The naked lady was yet another reminder that something was amiss.

Her digitally enhanced outline strolled languidly across a screen outside the locker room at Taekwang Country Club. To the obvious question – “What is that?” – came a one-word reply: “Art.”

Outside, stadium lighting washed over the Bonsai trees that lined the fairways of Taekwang’s North and South Courses, creating a landscape portrait writ large. Automated, five-seat carts, controlled remotely by female caddies, hummed along tracks,

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The Real Reason You Don't Hear About Tiger Woods Anymore

like something out of a sci-fi film.
2016: A Golf Odyssey.

I like to think I've had a fair range of golf experiences in my life. I've played Augusta National, its greens still slick as ice from its little "tooniment." I've walked along the Pink Beach at Kauri Cliffs in New Zealand and followed the lush Garden Route in South Africa.

Nothing I've seen prepared me for golf in South Korea.

This was my second visit to South Korea, but my first immersion into the club life there while also covering the LPGA KEB Hana Bank Championship at Sky72's Ocean Course.

I had come to Taekwang with a group of journalists to play night golf in a country so mad about the game that there simply is not enough daylight to accommodate everyone who wants to play. Taekwang, located on the outskirts of Seoul, is a 36-hole assembly line, churning through so many golfers that many of the holes have two greens to combat wear and tear.

Near the clubhouse is a four-story range – a necessity in a land-starved country – and each day some 800 players tirelessly beat balls from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., buying time rather than balls. Those golfers included LPGA star Ha Na Jang, who I found practicing on the automated green mats, just as she has done since childhood, developing a game good enough to win three times in 2016.

South Koreans don't do anything halfway. The country's remarkable economic transformation following the Korean War was dubbed the "Miracle on the Han River," but in truth, it's less a miracle than the product of a relentless work ethic. That's reflected in the common refrain that weekends are more like "Friday, Friday, Friday."

That mindset has created the world's 11th-largest economy, as measured by GDP, and immense wealth. It's not uncommon for South Koreans to drop seven figures to join the right kind of club, or even multiple clubs. Executives such as Dae Yong Kim, who hosted me at Haesley Nine Bridges Golf Club, may own



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memberships to multiple clubs, but they work too hard to enjoy them often.

(These pricey memberships often are business expenditures, though anti-graft legislation that went into effect in September could hamstring those practices.)

Public golf is no bargain, either. The Korea Leisure Industry Research Institute reports the average green fee for public courses is around \$100 on weekdays and \$150 on weekends. That doesn't include mandatory cart and caddie fees, which cost about \$180 per group.



No. 2 at Whistling Rock's Temple Course

...

Taekwang takes its name from the Seoul-based conglomerate that is

comprised of 25 companies and 10,000 employees.

While Taekwang Country Club is a golf factory serving the urban masses, the company's gem lies higher in the mountains, an hour's drive outside of Seoul, in Chuncheon.

There you'll find Whistling Rock Golf Club, whose 27 holes sit in the shadows of a structure so astonishing, so grandiose, so utterly beyond conventional realm that it seems trite to call it a clubhouse. It measures 167,000-square-feet – that number is not a typo – and spans a mountain ridge. It cost \$40 million, which includes Taekwang Chairman Ho-jin Lee's eclectic art collection.

"It's like the size of a national art gallery for some countries," marveled course architect Eric Iverson.

The courses, originally designed by Ted Robinson Jr., were similarly ambitious, having been blasted out of the mountainous terrain. One radio personality found the setting so dramatic that he dubbed Whistling Rock "Spielberg

National.”

“Great places don’t need explanation,” offered David Fisher, the club’s vice president of international business, as he welcomed the group. The slack-jawed expressions on our faces perhaps suggested otherwise.

Iverson, a senior associate at Renaissance Golf Design, was brought in to remove some of the severity of the Temple and Cocoon nines, shaving down greens to make the courses more playable on a day-to-day basis.

Taekwang wants Whistling Rock ranked among the world’s greatest courses, and to that end, no expense has been spared.

While our group warmed up, our painstakingly efficient caddie took notes on the four bags in her charge. The front of the automated cart – really more of a five-person limousine – was like an office-supply store, filled with colored pens and stickers for the scorecard. Caddies passed out decorative pins – usually butterflies or crowns – to stick on shirt collars and hats after each birdie. When a playing partner eagled the Cocoon’s sixth hole, a drivable par 4 over water, he was presented with a leather-bound book detailing the feat.

What, we wondered, would an ace merit?

Whistling Rock’s three nines – Cocoon, Cloud and Temple – take their names from the teahouses that dot each course. Comparing traditional halfway houses to these teahouses would be like trying to draw a straight line from Five Guys to the French Laundry. It just doesn’t compute.

The Cloud’s teahouse hovers in the trees like something out of a “Star Wars” film, overlooking a picturesque par 3 that packs a picture from the back tees at 213 yards.

Are you starting to get the picture? Golf at South Korea’s private clubs is an event. Members and their guests arrive toting pricey Boston bags packed with several outfits. They eat multiple meals at the clubhouse and teahouses. Whistling Rock’s nine chefs create artful dishes using organic herbs

and vegetables grown on the property. Members and guests pamper themselves in the expansive locker rooms and saunas. And the clubs seem locked in a game of one-upsmanship. The sight of the soaring, lattice-shaped, wooden canopy at Haesley Nine Bridges, owned by the construction conglomerate CJ E&C, ignited a round of iPhone photo-taking by our group.



The clubhouse at Whistling Rock

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While these courses felt a world apart from the high-rise living of cramped Seoul, the soundtrack for each round featured a familiar yet unusual chorus: military aircraft.

“We’re still technically in a state of war here,” said Jim Prussa, an American who oversees the grounds at the golf factory known as Sky72. (South Korea mandates 21 to 36 months of military service for all males ages 18-35.)

The sprawling Sky72 facility leases its land from nearby Incheon International Airport and sits 35 miles from the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, the region that demarcates North Korea from South Korea.

There are arresting cables, like those found on aircraft carriers, on the par 4s and par 5s at Sky72. Should the North try to invade the South and take over the airport, the idea is to pull those cables across the fairways to keep aircraft from landing. But for the hundreds of thousands of golfers who go through this facility annually, they’re simply immovable obstructions. Besides, any North Korean spy with a golf handicap already would know about the cables.

Sky72, with its 360-degree range and five courses, buzzes with

action starting at 5:30 a.m. Golf here begins and ends in darkness, as several of the courses are fully lighted. The Classic and Lake courses alone get almost a quarter of a million rounds annually. When a typhoon came through in 2010, Prussa said play was suspended for only two hours while the eye moved through the area.

When it snows, more than 150 people, including office secretaries and caddies, work to clear it.

Prussa tracked how much turf was being torn up during play and found that key areas of fairways on the Ocean Course, where the LPGA plays annually, are completely removed in 0.7 years.

“Twice a year all the of the landing zones are completely removed,” he said.

There are 447 golf facilities in South Korea, according to a 2015 survey by the R&A, but at least three-quarters of those are private. The oversaturated private market, combined with the ability for members to get back their enormous initiation fees after a set number of years, has placed tremendous strain on private clubs. The masses are driven to widely popular screen golf facilities and packed ranges to satiate their obsession.

But at places like Whistling Rock, where Taekwang President Ki-yoo Kim spoiled his guests with selections from the club’s 30,000-bottle collection and encouraged them to dance Gangnum Style under the moonlight, it was a golf fantasyland.

On our final evening, the entire staff – from caddies to chefs, even executives in suits – lined up to bid farewell in a receiving line that extended all the way to the bus.

“Don’t they know who we are?” one writer wondered aloud in awe.

Surely they’ve figured it out by now.

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