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## Golf Industry Grows as New Courses Open

By Stephen Kurczy  
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Photo courtesy of Phokeethra Country Club A bunker-guarded hole lies in wait at Phokeethra Country Club in Siem Reap.

Siem Reap - The number of golf courses in Cambodia went from two to four in 2007 and could double again to eight by 2010 with four more courses in various stages of planning, according to Cambodia Golf Association Secretary-General Suos Yara.

The two to open most recently, in Siem Reap, are the country's only PGA-rated courses, and they're playing off each other to bolster the nascent golf industry.

Yet growth is not coming easy.

The two new Siem Reap golf courses are still not sufficient to entice many foreign golf tourists to visit Cambodia, according to information from the International Association of Golf Tour Operators.

"We're a growing destination, and golf is the fastest growing sport in all of Asia," said Maximilian Kaendler, clubhouse manager at Phokeethra Country Club in Siem Reap, as he steered a golf cart around the 18-hole course, which in November 2007 hosted the nation's first major golfing event.

But Kaendler said there needs to be a variety of courses to attract golf tourism.

"Nobody flies halfway around the world to play one round of golf," he said.

Of the 8 million golfers in Europe, according to IAGTO, 30 percent will take a golf holiday this year, and 70 percent of them are looking for new destinations to visit, which bodes well for the future of Cambodia's golf industry.

"The more we see businesspeople come, the more we see golfers come as well," Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh said while golfing at Siem Reap's Angkor Golf Resort earlier this month. "It is a sport where you develop friendships very fast, which is good for business as well," he added.

About 500 golfers have visited Phokeethra each month since it officially opened last April, Kaendler said. Closer to the center of Siem Reap town, Angkor Golf Resort opened in late November, and in its first month of operation saw 1,000 visitors, according to Adam Robertson, Angkor's golf operations manager.

Both new courses boost the local economy, according to Kaendler and Robertson: Angkor employs nearly 400 staff and Phokeethra about 300, almost all of whom are locals benefiting from golfers who pay upwards of \$100 for a single round of golf.

But Cambodia's golf industry still faces hurdles.

Robertson said they need increased exposure for Cambodia to become a golfing tourism destination. Few travelers wander onto the course while visiting the region, so the only people on the greens are usually local businessmen and government officials.

South African tourist David Chandler, who visited the Angkorian temples in early January, said he never suspected Cambodia even had a course until he happened to spot a brochure for Angkor Golf Resort in his hotel room.

"I was pleasantly surprised," Chandler said. "Though my girlfriend wasn't."

Still more obstacles face the industry. The sport remains alien to most locals. While golf is now firmly embedded in China and Thailand, countries where Robertson previously worked, he said it's new to Cambodia and proving a little difficult to train employees.

Wayne Dai, the general manager of Cambodia Golf & Country Club in Phnom Penh, agreed that Cambodians haven't immediately taken to the game.

"Most workers are from farms and never had the experience of a golf course," said Dai, a native of Taiwan.

Robertson ticked off a trainer's task-list for his employees: "Getting them to be knowledgeable caddies, to give advice, to keep their eye on the golf ball."

To increase awareness of the game, Angkor offers Cambodian players reduced rates and plans to open a golf academy.

Both Robertson and Kaendler foresee Cambodia as playing off the golf industry in Vietnam, which the International Association of Golf Tour Operators awarded the 2007 Undiscovered Golf Destination of the Year.

"Indochina has great potential as an emerging golf destination," Peter Walton, the chief executive of London-based IAGTO, wrote in an email. "It has the climate and topography that allows for great golf courses near to tourist centers, and the varying landscapes will add to the variety of courses available."

According to IAGTO, of all golfers interested in Cambodia, only 15 percent would actually visit if only one golf course was within driving distance of a hotel. With two golf courses available this increases to 25 percent. But once three courses open within a 40-minute driving distance, 75 percent of all golfers interested in visiting Cambodia would be satisfied, Walton said. Once five courses are accessible from the accommodation center, Cambodia can attract 100 percent of golfers interested in the destination.

"It's in its infancy right now, along with all the other industries that go with it: tourism, events, golf balls," Robertson said. "[But] golf is here to stay."

Two new courses are scheduled to open in 2009: one on the Vietnam border and another in Siem Reap, according to Suos Yara. Phokeethra's Phnom Penh course and another course in Sihanoukville should both open in 2010, he added.

Dai of Cambodia Golf & Country Club, which along with Royal Cambodia Phnom Penh Golf Club is just south of the capital, said he was not concerned about losing business to Siem Reap, though he agreed that the Angkor and Phokeethra courses are on another level.

As of now, statistics on how many people come to Cambodia to golf are unavailable. But as long as foreign entrepreneurs continue to invest in Cambodia, Cham Prasidh said they'll bring

with them a demand for golf.

And Chandler said that although Cambodia's golf industry is still in its early stages, the beautiful course and good prices were enough to pull him away from temple hopping with his girlfriend.

"I wouldn't come to Cambodia for the golf," Chandler said after finishing a game in the late afternoon sun.

"But I made my Angkor Wat tour fit the golf schedule."