

# Mile-High Masterpiece

*At 5,000 feet above sea level and almost a century old, Vietnam's Dalat Palace Golf Club is as distinct as it is dazzling*

STORY BY **JIM SULLIVAN** AND **SCOTT RESCH**  
 PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF **MANDARIN MEDIA**

**D**eane Beman was sitting on the patio behind the 18th green at Dalat Palace Golf Club two Decembers ago when the three-and-a-half-hour round he'd just completed produced a realization.

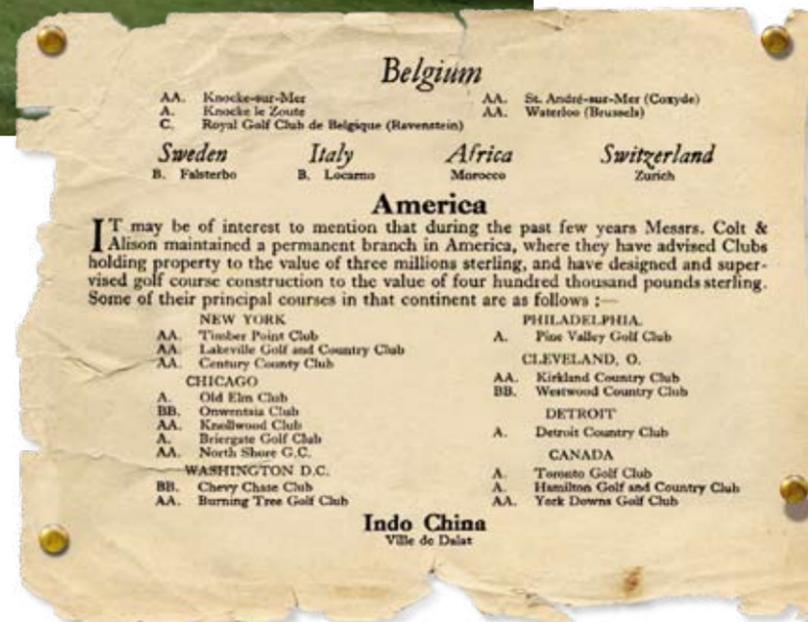
"I'm not sure there's a prettier setting for golf than Dalat," said the former playing professional who also served as Commissioner of the PGA Tour in America for 25 years. "The greens are as good as I've ever putted. They're as good as you're ever going to find. They sit well, like greens of the classic courses."

Truth is, Dalat Palace, in the cool Central Highlands of Vietnam, is as classic as golf courses come. One need only look at its history, which begins in 1922. That's when the renowned French architect, Ernest Hebrard, laid out the master urban plan for the still fledgling hill station resort in Dalat.

Although 1922 is often reckoned as the year the Dalat course opened, this is not likely. Nor is it likely that the course was the inspiration of Bao Dai, the last emperor of feudal Vietnam. Bao Dai was born in 1913 and spent much of his youth in France. He did not return to Vietnam until 1932, at which time the golf course in Dalat was probably open for play. It's not yet certain exactly when the first hickory stick swiped at a gutta percha ball on the first tee at Dalat, but 1931 is a very good bet.

Around 1930, the renowned golf course architectural firm, Colt & Alison, listed the "Ville de Dalat" in "Indo China" as one of the courses in their worldwide portfolio. The course had not been listed in their promotional material throughout the 1920s, according to researcher Paul Turner. Nor was the course allotted a categorization in the c. 1930 advertisement, which suggests the course was in the preliminary stages of development at that time.

Turner's research has not turned up any evidence that Harry S. Colt (1869-1951) or Charles H. Alison (1882-1952) had traveled to Vietnam to plot the course, and he thinks it's unlikely that either architect had. "C.H. Alison





did work in Japan in 1930,” wrote Turner [see *HK Golfer* July/August 2008 edition]. “Occasionally Colt would design a course from [topographic] maps or aerial photography. He was reported to have done so for a course (Bukit Timah Club) in Singapore.” Turner believes Colt & Alison may have routed the Dalat course the same way.

### Open for Sure

By 1933, the course was definitely open for play, as evidenced by this passage from an English-language brochure published that year: “The Lang-Biang Palace and the Grand Hotel de Dalat...offer every modern comfort, and diversion, including concerts, tennis, golf, walking tours and motor excursions.” (For more, see *From Indochine to Indochic*:

### Trademark Traits

There’s no known record of what Casper did back in 1966 on what’s currently the par-5 sixth hole, but there’s good chance he was impressed by its appearance.

With water all along the left, pines all along the right, and a peninsula green that is both scenic and scary, the second longest hole on the course is a downright ace.

The 16th is the best of several par 4s where the approach plays over water. And the 5th is a par 3 of championship proportions; water (again) fronts the green, and the carry is more than 200 yards.

“You can breathe a sigh of relief after 5 and 6...for one hole,” said T.W. Hughes, the course’s former managing director. “From the tee box at the 8th, the views of town are spectacular, but the fairway looks about as wide as a coin slot. Tough, sure, but you’ll never forget it.”

*The Lang Bian/Dalat Palace Hotel and French Colonial Leisure, Power and Culture,* by Eric T. Jennings in *Modern Asian Studies* 37, 1 (2003), 2003, p. 179.)

At that time, another course opened for play in Vietnam, the Go Vap Golf Course (a.k.a. Saigon Golf Club). This course dates to the tenure of Governor-General Pierre Pasquier (1928 - 1934) as evidenced by this entry from a *National Geographic* article in October 1935: “The late Governor-General Pasquier drove the first ball on a new golf course and aviation flourishes in Saigon.” It’s no surprise that *National Geographic* coupled golf and aviation since the old course was situated close to Tan Son Nhat Airport.

Whatever his involvement in the course’s development, Bao Dai’s love for the game of golf is certain. He enjoyed vacationing at several royal villas in Dalat, partly for proximity to Vietnam’s big game and partly, we can assume, for the proximity to the Dalat Golf Club. Today, Bao Dai’s clubs are on display in his former villa near the end of Trieu Viet Vuong Street.

### Restoration in the 1950s

At the time of Bao Dai’s abdication in 1945, the course at Dalat was abandoned. Local vegetation overwhelmed the greens and fairways so thoroughly that when the course was revived, in the late 1950s, the layout’s savior, a medical doctor named Dao Huy Hach, had to rely on aerial photos from the *National Geographical Institute* to pick out the putting surfaces.

Dr. Hach had started to play golf at the Saigon Golf Club in the mid 1950s when Hoa Van Nguyen, architect of the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon, served as president of the Saigon Club. For Saigon players, golf in mile-high Dalat was the anti-dote to the year-round swelter of golf in the city.

The Saigon Golf Club funded most of the restoration, but there were numerous pro bono services offered by Dalat Golf Club members. The government also contributed money towards the construction of greens. In addition, members paid a 4,000VND (US\$23) initiation fee and 600VND (US\$4) monthly fee. There were about 40 members through the 1960s, most from the embassy staffs and foreign construction companies in the area.

The restoration of the course continued for nearly 15 years, as Dr. Hach drew on the assistance of the Saigon Golf Club, Japanese construction companies, and other members of the Dalat Golf Club to re-establish the original nine holes and begin construction of a second nine. Dr. Hach received assistance from the USGA for the second nine, including guidance on construction of greens, at no charge. In

all, Dr. Hach estimated it cost about 3 million VND (about US\$17,000) to bring back the course and clubhouse.

The clubhouse, itself, was and is a Le Tourquet style villa, with Tudor detailings that evoke golf’s roots in the British Isles. The villa is one of hundreds that the French built in Dalat throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Still, for all of the clubhouse’s visual appeal, it was a rustic affair for Dalat’s second generation of golfers.

“It was not to international standards,” said Dr. Hach. “It was like a garage: no power, no landscaping, no water. I had to bring all of that in.”

In 1959, Dr. Hach added a ninth hole to the original 8-hole layout in Dalat. Six years later, these nine holes were open for play — with a sand and motor oil mix standing in for grass on the greens — and Dr. Hach was contemplating another nine holes. A war got in the way.

### A Champion in Dalat

That didn’t stop Billy Casper from playing a round in Dalat. In early 1966, several months before he beat Arnold Palmer to win the U.S. Open at San Francisco’s Olympic Club, Casper played the course on a tour of Vietnam organized by the U.S. State Department.

“In Dalat, the course looked like it was just carved out of the dirt,” Casper said in a 2007 interview. “There was no grass whatsoever, and dirt greens, too. It was the only time I had ever been on anything like that. But I also remember that Dalat was a very special place.”

Dr. Hach played with Casper and remembered the first hole this way: “The first hole was a par 5 and [Casper] hit a driver and 6-iron to the green, and still bogeyed the hole. He had to get used to our greens. But after the first hole, he had no problem.”

Despite the war, players kept teeing off, in both Saigon and Dalat. Dr. Hach played his last round in 1974. And golfers in Saigon were still looking for birdies through the waning days of April 1975.

### Second Revival in the 1990s

From 1975 to 1993, the course was left to grow over once again. In 1993, a joint venture project between Danao International Holdings Limited (U.S.-based) and Lam Dong Province resulted in the renovation of the first nine holes and the completion of the second nine. The course was christened Dalat Pine Lake Golf Club in 1993, then became Dalat Palace Golf Club in 1995.

Since then, the Dalat Palace Golf Club has established itself as the premier course in Vietnam — an uninterrupted string of inventive, demanding golf holes that twists and undulates

through a landscape of bougainvillea, red salvia, impatiens, mimosa and hydrangeas. Indeed, its challenge and beauty is continually recognized by *Golf Digest* (USA), which four times running has put the layout at the top of its biennial Planet Golf survey of Vietnam.

The honor is much deserved, according to Patrick Rielly, Beman’s friend and another influential man in the history of the PGA.

“I’ve been coming here for 12 years and if there’s one thing I’ve noticed it’s that everything here gets better every year,” said the former President of the PGA of America during his visit 18 months ago. “The caddies here are exceptional. That’s why the greens are so good. They’re down there fixing them, all the time.”



### Need to Know

#### Dalat Palace Golf Club

YARDAGE: 7,009 PAR: 72  
GREEN FEE: US\$65-75 (*Sofitel and Novotel guests*)  
CONTACT: +84-8-3744-4747; vietnamgolffresorts.com

#### Where to Stay

The landmark **Sofitel Dalat Palace Hotel**, built in 1922, provides one of Asia’s most opulent old-world stays (43 rooms; *sofitel.com*), while its nearby and similarly historic sister property, the **Novotel Dalat** (144 rooms; *novotel.com*), offers modern amenities at affordable rates. Hotel and golf packages are available through [vietnamgolffresorts.com](http://vietnamgolffresorts.com).

#### Getting There

The airport at Dalat is a 35-minute drive the centre of town. Vietnam Airlines ([vietnamairlines.com](http://vietnamairlines.com)) flies twice daily from Ho Chi Minh (50mins) and once daily from Hanoi (1hr, 40-mins).