



TEEING OFF IN TURKMENISTAN: HOW GOLF WENT GLOBAL

TOURISM The game has moved beyond its traditional Western strongholds and is becoming popular in other parts of the world, such as China. That means more choice for adventurous golfers, writes **Andy Brassell**

■ One of the sure signs that a business is booming is that it starts attracting the attention of criminals after a slice of the money. If that's so, then golf is a serious growth economy right now, at least in China. Although golf has been played by the country's elite since the 1980s, when bigwig Zhao Ziyang allowed himself to be photographed playing this decadent Western game, its popularity in China has exploded as the middle class has grown. In the Beijing area alone the government says there are now 170 courses and driving ranges – and amazingly 70 of these were built illegally in the past few years.

Compare this to America, where just 18 new courses opened in 2010, and you can see that the growth for golf now lies well beyond its traditional strongholds. Course designers and architects are keeping busy with this rapid growth. Jeff Howes, the founder of Jeff Howes Golf Design, based in Kilkenny, Ireland, is one of them. "I now have an office in Beijing and it's going well for us," he says. "Most of our work had been in Ireland, with the boom that started here in the early 90s, but with the collapse we're forced to go further afield. We had that luxury of choice before, but now if you want to stay in the business, you have to travel."

Howes says domestic interest is the key. "The Chinese are travelling more than they did and with the economy growing, something extra like Mission Hills [the sprawling 20km resort in Shenzhen in the south], which is

the largest golf complex in the world, can draw people to the area. It's not just attracting tourists, but people from other parts of China."

Peter Harradine, who designed his first course in 1968, is the chief architect at Dubai-based Harradine Golf. He too is impressed by the Chinese appetite for the fairways, though he is quick to point out that it isn't the only region of expansion. "Apparently they're building a thousand courses there in the next five or six years," he says. "It's going at an incredible pace, but northern Africa's still good for us. The jobs in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia haven't been stopped although they have other problems there. South America is going to be a future golfing market for sure – not just Brazil, but Chile, Colombia, Venezuela... the economy is picking up down there so the golf will definitely follow."

Whether the success is sustainable is a different question. Despite a jaw-dropping array of courses and facilities, the industry in Dubai is "in crisis," according to Harradine. "I think the UAE will probably build three new courses in the next ten years, and no more. They can't fill the courses they have now, and unless they really change the strategy to attract the guy that really wants to play golf, then it's going to be difficult."

Harradine believes that Dubai is suffering from a lack of a bespoke service to attract wealthy golfers. "There's 80-90 per cent occupancy in the hotels," he says, "but they're

not concentrating on the golf tourist, like in the Algarve or Turkey. It's mainly because the courses don't work together, and the golf tourist wants to play four, five or six courses."

While the likes of Kazakhstan and the Ukraine take their own steps to satisfying a home-based market, Turkey has established itself as an international player on the golf tourism circuit in the last decade. Michael Bann, of Rossendale in Lancashire, and his wife Susan go on golfing holidays three times a year, but don't hesitate in naming the Antalya coast as their preferred destination.

"There's a string of superb hotels along the coast and, just behind them, about ten golf courses which have all been built during the last ten years," he says. "You can play a different course each day. They're high-handicap courses, where as if you went to Scotland, the likes of Gleneagles and St Andrews are too difficult for someone like myself. It's reasonably easy golf, and you expect to keep playing all the time rather than losing balls all the time."

■ In South America the economy is growing, and golf will follow, to Brazil, Chile and Venezuela



The success of the region is built wholly on its mainly British, German and Scandinavian clientele, with few locals playing. "The resort is purpose-built," says Bann, "and you can't pay for anything in Turkish lira. The beaches are closed at the time of year we go, so the whole tourist industry is based around golf." Its increasing popularity is clear to

its regulars. "When we booked for Turkey in the past, we didn't have any problems," says Bann, "but now we have to book very, very early to get decent tee-off times, whereas if we want to go to Spain or Portugal last-minute, it's easy."

It's the traditional destinations that are under increasing pressure from the new kids on the block. In crisis-