

GOLF TRAVEL

A Player's Guide

Imaginative bunkering
is a feature at the
revolutionary Nikanti Golf
Club in Nakhon Pathom

Daring to be Different

The soon-to-open Nikanti Golf Club, within easy reach of central Bangkok, has the potential to become one of Thailand's very best courses, writes Alex Jenkins.

Photography by Patrick Lim



Guangdong province aside, Bangkok is the most popular destination for Hong Kong golfers. This really comes as no surprise: countless flights serve the Thai capital, reasonably-priced yet quality hotels abound and, above all, there are golf courses galore.

When one considers the best golfing experiences in and around this pulsating city of six million, it is hard to look past the likes of Alpine Golf and Sports Club, Rajpruek Golf Club and Thai Country Club. All three offer the required combination of strong design, excellent service and upscale off-course amenities. The only problem, however, is they're all private; getting on them without a member's introduction, is not especially straightforward.

Enter the brand-new Nikanti Golf Club. This 18-hole track, situated in Nakorn Pathom to the west of the city, dares to be different.

The work of charming Thai architect Piraporn Namatra of the Golf East design firm, Nikanti is the 291st course to open in the Land of Smiles and it surely ranks among the very best. Namatra, or Khun Ope as is he known, isn't afraid to think outside the box – his

thought-provoking designs at Banyan in Hua Hin and Santiburi, that cliffhanger of a course on Koh Samui pay testament to that – and he has crafted something revolutionary at Nikanti, and in more ways than one.

Nikanti, which is scheduled to open to the public in December, is a breath of fresh air and almost the complete antithesis to what has become known as the modern course. For a start it measures less than 7,000 yards from the very back tees – how refreshing! – but it is Khun Ope's 'triple-six' concept that is really unique. Sign of the devil it may be but at Nikanti three sixes equates to fun, for here there are six par-3s, six par-4s and six par-5s.

The idea of having an equal number of par-3, par-4 and par-5 holes might sound whacky, but it isn't. Indeed, the philosophy makes perfect sense; this is not a course that has been designed to stage a professional tournament, it has been created for amateur golfers to enjoy themselves, which one could argue has been missing from the design brief of countless courses that have sprung up in recent times.

There's something reassuring about having more than the standard number of par-3 and par-5 holes. Golfers, almost regardless of ability,

Strongly contoured greens, protected by run-off areas and, in some cases, water offer a formidable defense at this Piraporn Namatra / Golf East design



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The par-3 eighth requires a precise long iron; the closing hole, a reachable par-5, offers just the right amount of risk and reward

are always looking for holes to score on – and Nikanti's configuration provides opportunities to do so. But don't be mistaken. This is not a course which your average player is going to start carding personal bests. The fairways, while wide enough to accommodate drives that haven't necessarily been struck from the centre of the club, feature plenty of movement; you're not always going to have a nice flat lie. Many of the greens, meanwhile, are strongly contoured (and at times frighteningly quick) and are impressively defended by attractively sculptured bunkers. Where water has been used it has been used intelligently, particularly on the par-5s.

Nor is Nikanti flat. Bangkok courses often get criticized for their lack of elevation change, but that's not the case here. Furthermore, clubbing is made trickier by an almost constant breeze that sweeps through the property. It could be said that Nikanti rewards good play more than any other course in Thailand. But ignore its strategic demands by trying to bit off more than you can chew and you'll soon find yourself in trouble.

Nikanti distances itself yet further than the norm by its routing. Rather than having traditional front and back nines, here there are three loops of six, each one returning to the stylish and soon-to-be sumptuously appointed clubhouse. The reason? Flexibility. Don't have



time for a full 18? Just play 12. Want to have another go at the reachable but dangerous par-5 18th? Why not squeeze in that final loop of six?

While the club's owners, headed by managing director "Nick" Warawit Sasomsub, another personable young chap, have yet to determine whether they will introduce a membership structure, the course is open to all. And they're not looking at cramming people on, either. Tee times will be staggered at 15-minute intervals, which should help with the pace of play.

So how much will a round here cost? On the face of things, THB5,500 (approximately HK\$1,300) on a weekday and THB7,000 (HK\$1,700) on a weekend might sound high but it's an all-inclusive fee which includes golf, cart, caddie and two meals (breakfast and lunch or lunch and dinner). In reality, it's a small price to pay for what will surely be considered one of the finest clubs in the kingdom.

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IN AND AROUND BANGKOK: OTHER TOP TRACKS

MUANG KAEW

Occupying a splendid location within easy reach of downtown Bangkok, the redesigned Muang Kaew is among the most popular courses in the capital with local golfers. It's easy to see why. Not only it is quick and easy to get to but it's also a lot of fun to play.

The work of prolific Schmidt-Curley Design, this water-laced track offers plenty of room off the tee but comes into its own around the greens. These are interesting complexes – elevated and protected by run-off areas and deep bunkers it is here, rather than in the aquamarine depths of the lakes that flank many of the fairways where recreational players will lose strokes.

Candidate for best hole on the course is the risk/reward 13th, an exciting par-5 featuring a blind drive, but there is a fine variety of holes here

Muang Kaew has Tiff Eagle greens and Paspalum fairways, which when in perfect condition translate to very quick putts and perfect lies. Off the course the club continues to impress. Although the clubhouse doesn't seem to have been renovated since it opened in 1992 and there's no driving range to warm up on, the staff are courteous and the food is universally excellent. All in all, Muang Kaew is a rewarding choice.

muangkaewgolf.com

SUWAN

Situated close to Nikanti among the rural villages of Nakorn Pathom, about an hour's drive from the city, Suwan is an at times challenging layout, one that uses its naturally undulating terrain to great effect. Rolling elegantly through palms and ornate lakes and ponds, Suwan is not the work of an internationally-recognised architect – not that it seems to matter one bit. A Thai Army Major-General, Weerayudth Phetbuasak, is credited with the design here and he has done a fine job of providing a strategic test, one that benefits aesthetically from its country idyll.

A host of a handful of professional events, including the 2011 Thailand Open, a OneAsia Tour event, Suwan is routinely found to be in excellent condition. Signature hole honours have been given to the 17th, a mid-length par-4 whose green sits on a lake-side promontory, and while this is understandable it has rivals, especially among the par-3s. The one hole that is difficult to love however is the 14th, another mid-length par-4 but one which confuses due to the extremeness of the angle of the dogleg. Not all will agree with that sentiment but it is fun discussing the matter over a Singha in the clubhouse's comfortable restaurant that overlooks the ninth green.

suwangolf.com

SIAM COUNTRY CLUB, WATERSIDE COURSE

Siam Country Club has long drawn visitors thanks to the quality of its Old and Plantation courses, and its new Waterside layout, an IMG creation, is a very welcome addition to this top-drawer complex.

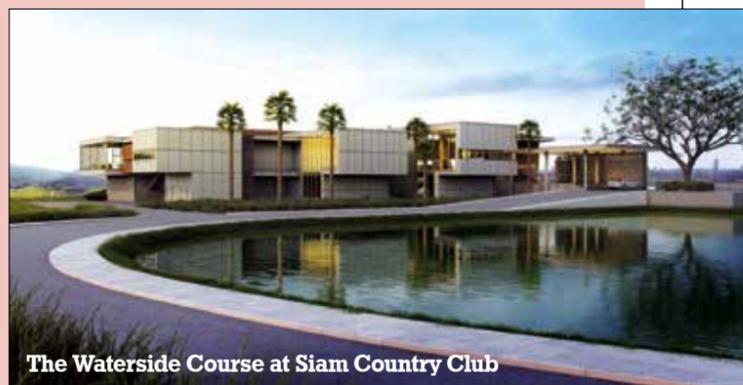
Featuring gently sloping terrain, making it very different than the other two hillier courses, the Waterside is another strategic gem, with numerous lakes and creeks framing the holes.



Muang Kaew Golf Club



Suwan Golf and Country Club



The Waterside Course at Siam Country Club

Despite this it is a very manageable proposition, one rather friendlier for the higher handicapper, because the landing areas are generous and there is more often than not the opportunity to run shots up on to the putting surfaces. The exception to this is the 17th, a huge par-5 that requires players to take on an approach shot over a deep ravine if the green is to be found in regulation.

The 18th, a strong par-4 that plays around a large lake and into the prevailing wind, provides a grandstand finish.

Because of its location in Chonburi, a good 90-minute drive from the centre of Bangkok, many will prefer staying in and around Pattaya, which is not only a lot closer but which boasts a slew of other fine courses – including the excellent Jack Nicklaus-designed Laem Chabang International – within easy reach.

siamcountryclub.com



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