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**SOUTH KOREA HAS CREATED
A GOLF CULTURE THAT LEAVES
MOST OTHER NATIONS
SWINGING AWAY IN A SANDY
BUNKER. MONOCLE VISITS
SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S TOP
CLUBS AND MEETS THEIR
QUIRKY MEMBERS AND
ATTENTIVE STAFF.**

GOLF STATE

THE GREEN STUFF

—South Korea

Preface

Clubhouses designed by Japanese architects and built by Swiss craftsmen, troupes of young female caddies attending to (almost) your every need and membership fees in the hundreds of thousands of dollars – golf is the ultimate statement of wealth in South Korea, and business is booming.

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The late afternoon sun bounces off the golden Jeff Koons sculpture sitting in the drive as Christopher Kwon pulls up in a dark blue Porsche and steps out smiling. The businessman makes his way into the lobby with its vaulted timber ceiling, splashes of contemporary art and walls of glass that frame the green mountain views. Mr Kwon is not checking into a chic hotel. Nor is he popping into his country pad for a weekend break. He is stepping across the threshold of what is one of the world's most exclusive scenes – a Korean golf club.

Golf in South Korea is big business. Gone are the days when the country's old authoritarian regimes deemed the game out of bounds for civil servants because of its associations with privilege. There are now an estimated 346 courses in South Korea – a number expected to rise to over 600 within four years to cater for the nation's 3.2 million players.

The fast-growing popularity of the game has been fuelled by the nation's players' professional successes, in particular the new generation of female golfing champions who dominate global rankings. But the country is not embracing any old golf: as befits a nation that rushed from agricultural society to cutting-edge industrial player in a few heady decades, Korean golf is aiming high. Striking modernist architecture, the finest course designers, stunning settings and quality service are the signatures of a new wave of South Korean golf clubs.

The staff are equally eye-catching: another unique aspect of Korean golf clubs is the presence of cavalcades of young, pretty, perma-smiling caddies (they are almost always female). The image of the caddies, resplendent in co-ordinating uniforms, holding parasols over fashionably dressed wealthy golfers and whizzing them around cartoon-perfect golf courses, goes hand in hand with Korea's luxury golf scene.

Not forgetting the fees: significantly higher than in the US or Europe, Korea's club fees often run into hundreds of thousands of dollars, making membership the ultimate social

statement. Among the most exclusive clubs is the Haesley Nine Bridges. Designed by Japanese architect Shigeru Ban and Korean Yoon Kyung-sik, the clubhouse has walls of glass, elegant furnishings and gallery-standard art (that Jeff Koons in the drive included).

But the scene-stealer is the structure: Ban's vaulted lattice-work frame of interwoven timber was assembled without nails – as inspired by traditional Korean hanok houses – by 60 specialists flown in from Switzerland. Since opening in September 2009, the club, an hour from Seoul, has acquired 200 members, each paying €700,000 for a 20-year membership.

Against a soundtrack of trickling water, manager Ahn Myoung-hoon sips tea from a delicate ceramic cup on the terrace. "Korean golf is considered very upper class, mainly for the purpose of business, networking and resting from work. Golf is an element that separates club members from normal people. It is a highly regarded dream to become a club member." Christopher Kwon, 48, is the friendly and relaxed managing director of a textile trading company and he knows why he's happy to pay the high fees. "For me, it's a way to release stress. Seoul is a big city and it can be difficult to escape so I come here maybe three times a month to relax."

Location is key when it comes to Korea's golf scene – as also reflected in The Ananti, a glamorous club less than an hour from Seoul that opened in May last year and where a lifetime's membership costs just under €400,000. Surrounded by the pine forests of Mount Yumyeong, The Ananti is the result of a rebuild and rebrand of the former Ritz Carlton Country Club by GHM Hotels. Gone is the classical European-style clubhouse erected by the current owner's father and in its place is a more dramatic modern creation by Korean architect Ken Min of SKM Architects. "The owner wanted something different and there is a very big gap between his generation and his father's generation," explains Ken. "A lot of younger Koreans are very



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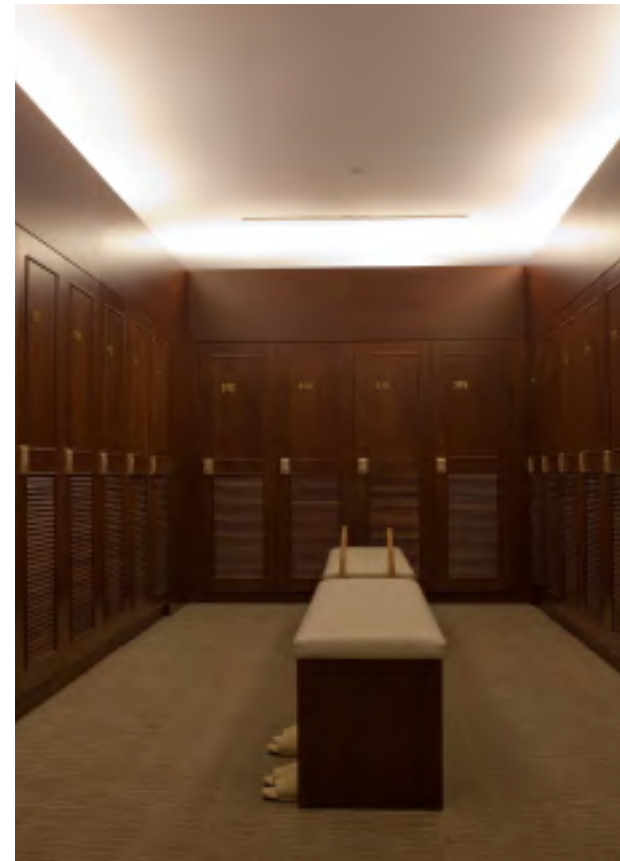
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interested in design, more free-spirited and daring. We didn't want to copy European architecture – we wanted to explore new possibilities for the future rather than sticking with the traditional over and over again.”

Upon arrival at the club you're faced by an organic swerve of concrete and a small red tower that appears to change colour in the shifting daylight. With some 90 per cent of the structure subterranean, it's all that can be seen above ground. An Ibiza-style soundtrack plays inside the main building, complemented by black walls, slate flooring, monochrome photography and escalators descending further into the club.

A lively restaurant is filled with lunching ladies; children play in the outdoor swimming pool and clutches of laughing housewives and businessmen dressed in the latest rainbow-bright golf fashion gather in buggies at the start of the courses. Sitting in the president's office in the tower is general manager Santé Ahn, who is as smooth as the setting. “We are showcasing a new lifestyle. It's not just about golf – there's swimming, tennis, skating – something for the whole family,” he says.

“Many people think that this lifestyle is something you only see on a TV show. But we're trying to show that anyone can enjoy this lifestyle. Around 30 per cent of our members are over-fifties and 40 per cent are fortysomething. But it's not about age, it's about style. We have grey-haired grandpas who like listening to house music.”

It is the same pioneering streak which made the South Korean company the first to create a high-end luxury hotel and golf course in North Korea's picturesque Mount Kumgang, also designed to critical acclaim by Ken Min. Just one week before its scheduled opening in 2008, a tourist was shot dead nearby and the property has lain empty ever since. “But we are determined to open it one day,” says Ahn.

Back in South Korea, another recent addition to Korea's high-end golfing scene is the Jack Nicklaus Golf Club Korea, which opened last October in the new Songdo International Business District in Incheon, near Seoul. This time, the backdrop consists of skyscrapers looming over flatlands reclaimed from the Yellow Sea. The mood is more corporate than family: children are not permitted and the décor creates the subdued atmosphere of a smart business hotel.

Choi Bo-hyun, senior manager at the club, which costs €65,000 for a five-year membership, says, “There are many Korean golf courses in the mountains. However, this is a reclaimed land project. On the course, you see beautiful skyscrapers and one of the longest bridges in Korea. We pride ourselves on being a premium golf course in an urban style.”

Among members playing on the 18-hole course is the Korean actor Cha Kwang-soo. “I've been playing for 17 years,” he says. “Koreans are very good at making beautiful golf courses. This one is very nicely kept and one of the best places to play golf in Korea in my opinion. It's so convenient.” Nearby is the smiling caddie Choi You-ri, 20, in a neat white uniform and a side plait. “How did I get involved in golf? I was introduced to a professional golf player, he was the boyfriend of a



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friend. I started playing shortly after that. I enjoy it. Golf is very cool among people my age.”

The course, needless to say, is a sea of perfect green punctuated with rock features – which, one manager confesses, are not real but made using Hollywood scenery technology. “During the first tests they didn't make a noise when golf balls hit them so we had to remake them so they made the right noise,” he confides as we whizz past in a buggy. The man responsible for keeping the course up to scratch is Yoom Kyung-ho, director and golf course superintendent, whose team of 16 get up before sunrise to mow the grass at 04.00. “This job is like being a farmer,” he smiles. “I worry if there is too little rain. I worry if there is too much rain. The Korean climate is so extreme – very hot in the summer, very cold in winter. We need very meticulous care so the grass is in the best possible condition.”

As befits the nation's status as luxury golf nirvana, an establishment claiming to be the world's first official golf university opened in March. With its three-year courses focusing on playing, course management or business, Korea Golf University (KGU) aims to produce the nation's golfing stars of the future, alongside a new generation of industry leaders. Located a two-hour drive from the capital among rice fields and green mountains in Hoengseong-gun, Gangwon province, the university is home to 180 residential undergraduates.

Bright potted plants line steps leading into the clean-lined concrete faculty, which is cut into the mountains and overlooks the pristine courses of the ChungWoo Golf Club. During a scorching hot mid-week lunchtime, students are hitting golf shots in a multi-level practice range behind large green nets or tucking into lunch in the white cafeteria. Speaking from his office – filled with trophies, plants and golf clubs – Woo Chan-myong, university president and renowned television golf commentator, describes his mission. “Our goal is to raise future golf players and industry leaders,” he says. “Within the past 10 years, there has been such a big increase in player numbers. The people who play today are those with a lot of money, a lot of time and a good network. But more and more people across Korea want to play too. Because we have had so many successful young players, we feel there is a need for official education to create industry professionals and talented players – the elite of the golfing world.”

With 70 per cent of the students female, Woo highlights women inspired by the legendary successes of Pak Se-Ri who shot to fame when she won the 1998 US Women's Open. “Her successes gave the dream of being golf players to many young girls at the time who have since become known as the Pak Se-Ri kids.” One bright hope for the future is Kim Ga-yeong, 19, from Seoul. Standing in the practice range, at first sight she seems more typical teen than sportswoman, from her earrings spelling out “LOVE” to the fluffy dogs hanging off her clubs.

“I want to be as famous as Pak Se-Ri,” she says. “A friend of my father's first recommended golf because I'm quite tall. Playing makes me feel really good. It always cheers me up.”

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Tee time: South Korean golf in numbers

346 golf courses in South Korea, according to Korea Golf University statistics.

600 golf courses are expected to be open by 2015

3.2 million golf players in South Korea

34 is the number of times 23-year-old South Korean champion Shin Ji-yai has won tournaments around the world, including eight LPGAs and the British Open. She's also released an album of Christian songs.

36 of the top 100 ranking female golfers in the world are South Korean – four in the top 10 – according to the 500 Rolex Rankings for women (as of August).

She adds, “I've loved this course so far. I play every day, which is amazing. In Korea that's normally impossible as it's so expensive, so this is golf heaven. Apart from lectures and eating, I'm spending every second of the day playing golf.”

Not everyone is as lucky. Golf may be omnipresent in daily Korean life – from television and magazines to countless golf fashion stores – but for most, it remains a world elusively out of bounds. There are few stronger reminders of this than the thousands of screen-golf cafés thriving across the country including Nonhyeon Hills Screen Golf, a subterranean café under a car park in Gangnam.

The antithesis of golf-club chic, vending machines sit in the entrance, and the sound of computerised birdsong and cigarette smoke fill the air of the brown-walled screening rooms offering inner-city visitors their golf fixes. Standing before a glaring screen is Na Dong-soo, 51, CEO of a fish farm, dressed in incongruously immaculate white golfing shoes, pressed trousers and a single glove. “I come here every day,” says Mr Na, who pays €12 for a daytime game. “It's expensive and time-consuming playing in golf clubs and this is only 20 minutes' walk from my home. I go to a real golf club maybe once a month but this helps improve my game in between. I'd prefer to be outside playing, but it's a money thing.”

A boom in new clubs over the coming decade may well make some memberships slightly more financially accessible to players such as Mr Na but the country's elite are not going to be handing over the keys to their clubs anytime soon. — (M)