

MERAJ
SHAH

OVER THE TOP

GOLF USED to be a gentle game when English planters first set up rudimentary golf courses around the coffee plantations in the Nilgiris. Eddington's great arrow of time just flies slower in Mercara, the capital of Kodagu (Coorg) district. For itinerant golfers, that's a good thing: swinging a club just comes easier when you dial down the pace. And Coorg's stock as a golf destination goes up even further when you discover that there are a number of quirky small layouts to tee it up at.

The centre of south India's golf firmament (and increasingly of the country), though, is Bengaluru, with over half-a-dozen courses, fabulous climes most of the year and some excellent dining options. KGA, the crown jewel in the city's glittering array of courses, just keeps getting better year after year. Host to a multitude of tournaments, including the national open a few years back, the KGA is in an immaculate condition throughout the year. Surrounded by IT parks and towering ho-

tels on one side, and the HAL airport on the other, the KGA offers a rare sense of serenity almost unimaginable anywhere else in this bustling city.

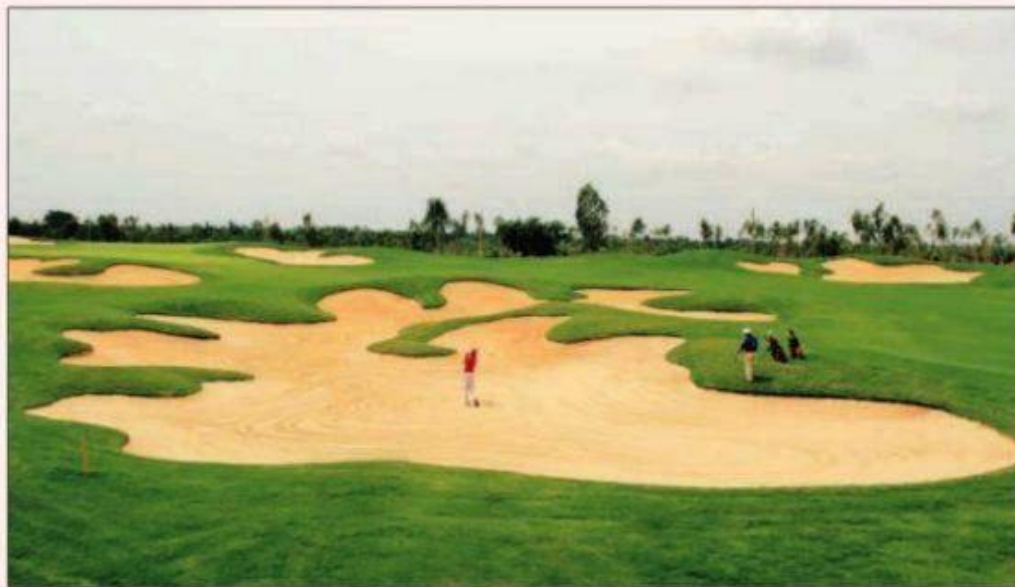
Eagleton, the golf village on the outskirts of the city, is possibly the most successful golf realty project in the country. What was once a relatively short golf course has been lengthened over the years in order to make it more on a par with international championship length courses. Keep an eye out for Anirban Lahiri, India's top golfer, who practices and plays here when not on tour.

As far as heritage goes, none can touch the Bangalore Golf Club. Reportedly the oldest course outside the British Isles to have remained in the same location since its inception, the course has upped the ante after a renovation in the early 2000s by Phil Ryan. The fairways and greens have always been top-notch and it's probably one of the only courses, where you can get a perfectly-cut flying divot. The grand old course now has a new clubhouse and stay-and-play facilities for visiting golfers.

A clutch of new courses, notably Prestige Golfshire and Zion Hills, have added to Bengaluru's golfing allure. The former, located at the foothills of the Nandi Hills on the edge of Lake Karehalli just outside the city, is a world-class facility

The beautiful south

In south India, golf is pretty much like the people—laidback and easygoing—and you can take all the time you want over the ball



Zion Hills Golf County in Bengaluru embraces the natural lakes and rocky outcropping of the surrounding area

with residential and dining outlets on a par with international golf resorts that complement the supremely well-maintained course. Zion Hills Golf County (formerly known as Champions Reef) is a Ron Fream design that embraces the natural lakes and rocky outcropping of the surround-

ing area. The massive greens—some of which measure over 10,000 sq ft and have up to three tiers—can put even the best of putters on their backfoot. But the bent-greens make approach shots and chipping a true pleasure. The signature fifth hole that measures a whopping 258 yards, including

a significant carry over a water hazard from the championship tee, is arguably the toughest par 3 in the country. Currently only nine holes, the course is expected to open the back nine by next year.

But don't leave the south without teeing it up at the classic gorse-infested Kodaikanal

course or without sampling the undulating charms of the Ooty Golf Club. With colonial-era layouts, both are as much a test of physical conditioning as of golf. Founded in 1895, Kodaikanal GC is India's only layout to follow organic course management, allowing a variety of wildlife, endangered and common, to thrive here (it is also bordered by a jungle). As per popular belief, the first members of Ooty Gymkhana didn't think much of the original layout: too tough, too tight, just frustratingly difficult! Because of the landscape's undulations, Colonel Ross Thompson, executive engineer of the Nilgiris district at the end of the 19th century (and architect of the course, which dates back to 1896), had no option but to craft blind holes. There are no less than nine of them!

Further south, the Madras Gymkhana Club is unique: it is one of the very few golf courses in the world to be located within a racecourse. The layout, dating back to 1877, is flat, but a combination of the rough and breeze makes it tricky to negotiate. Trivandrum Golf Club, situated in the capital city of Kerala, claims to have records to prove that it is, in fact, older than the Royal Calcutta Golf Club, hence making it the oldest golf course in the world outside of the British Isles. In colonial times, this historic nine-hole layout used to be part of the hunting

lodge estate of Maharaja Sreemoolam Tirunal of the (erstwhile) Travancore royal family (circa 1850s, making it India's second-oldest golf course). The course is located at the centre of the town near (the *maharaja's*) Kowdiar Palace and still retains the original clubhouse built more than a century back. It was recently declared a heritage building by the ASI. The course, owned and run by the government of Kerala, seems deceptively simple. Its modest yardage is well-protected by tight fairways lined with trees, which penalise all but the straightest shots. But that apart, the only bunkers are greenside, the greens roughly cut, and hardly any hazards. Trivandrum is 40 km from Kovalam—one of south India's most popular coastal towns—which has a fabulous beach and a collection of scenic resorts perched cliff-side overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Apart from golf, which is rapidly gaining more and more popularity in the region, south India offers a multitude of experiences—by the beach or in the mountains, alone or in a group, and everything in between. Add to that near-perfect-for-golf weather for most of the year and the south makes an excellent escape from the harsh north Indian summer.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game