



The Empire Brunei: From Greens to Greenery

BY DAVID BOWDEN

18th hole at The Empire Brunei

From a regional perspective, golf in Brunei is very much an unknown quantity and something of a hidden tropical gem. Perhaps the same could be said about the whole country, all 5,765 sq km of it on the island of Borneo, tucked in between two parts of northern Sarawak.

The Empire Brunei is a grand and expansive retreat facing the South China Sea that includes an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus-designed championship golf course and a lavish hotel quite unlike anything else in Southeast Asia. Designed by Nicklaus in 1997, the course is renowned for its playing

surface and 86 challenging bunkers strategically located around the course. Broad fairways are forgiving, and access to all holes is via well-formed concrete paths.

The par three, seventh hole at 215m off the black tee is rated by many as the best hole to play. From the elevated tee, golfers have to drive across the rough, downhill with crosswinds that routinely come into play. Another signature hole is the 502m, par five, 15th that runs parallel to the coastline. Golfers are required to negotiate the gigantic 'sandy waste' bunker and to skilfully negotiate the rough and forest lining the fairway. Here, too, wind

comes into play, with the approach shot past a bunker and onto the elevated green.

Stan Everitt, Director of Golf and Leisure, says that the course is very popular with visiting Korean, Chinese, and Japanese golfers who find that the course offers great value and can be played year round. He adds that even during the comparatively rainy months of January and December, the rain mostly falls in the evening.

With the proximity of the sea and tropical rainforest, golfers can also expect to see some wildlife such as kingfishers (and other birds), monkeys, and lizards while they play.



Aerial view of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque

(eight lanes), badminton, squash, cycling, kayaking, stand-up paddle boarding, an indoor lap pool, and tennis. There is a fitness centre (featuring a mixed gym, as well as one for women only), along with a lap pool and several other swimming options around the hotel.

Spa services on the first floor of the Country Club are available from 10am until 9pm (male masseurs for males and female masseurs for females). The spa menu includes facials, foot and hand treatments, massages, wraps, and various packages. "Golfers are pampered here, although at the present moment we do not offer caddy services but that could change in the future," Stan explained. He added that new carts provide GPS functions in various languages.

Club management also oversees the operations of the other two courses in the country, namely Royal Brunei Golf and Country Club and Royal Brunei Airlines Golf Club. Golf tourism is

Tee-off times are from 6.30am (the sun rises earlier in Borneo than it does in Peninsular Malaysia), and the last tee-off is 4pm for a 7pm close of the course (the sun sets around 6.30pm). Times are subject to availability and advance bookings. Non-hotel guests can also play on the course, but at a slightly higher rate. Unsurprisingly, guests staying at The Empire Brunei hotel enjoy golf rates that are more favourable. In the evening, floodlights enable night golf under cooler conditions.

The hotel's Country Club, meanwhile, offers a range of sporting facilities, including 10-pin bowling



Boating at Ulu Temburong



Ulu Ulu National Park Resort

something that is just being realised here, with Brunei presenting the opportunity to play all three courses in a country on a single visit. Brunei's location also means that golfers can also play courses in neighbouring Sarawak and Sabah, with destinations such as Miri and Kota Kinabalu in the vicinity.

GOING GREEN

Brunei's rather diminutive landmass comprises two coastal areas separated by a stretch of land belonging to Sarawak. The landscape ranges from coastal plains to hilly lowland with much of it covered in lowland tropical rainforest. More than 70% of Brunei is forest, and 60% of this is virgin rainforest, having never been disturbed. Brunei really is the green lung of Borneo, and for adventurers seeking a truly wild rainforest encounter, Brunei is the place.

The crowning glory in Brunei's eco-arsenal is the 50,000-hectare Ulu Temburong National Park. Visiting and



5th green at The Empire Brunei



Canopy walk at Ulu Temburong National Park

staying in the park is exhilarating for those with an adventurous spirit, while travelling there is easily one of Asia's great river journeys.

Currently, a boat is required to reach the greener parts of Brunei from the capital, but a new, soon-to-open, 30-km long bridge will change all this – for better or for worse. In addition to boating into the park along a pristine river, visitors have the opportunity to visit an Iban longhouse, with some located just outside the township of Bangar, 40km southeast of Bandar Seri Begawan. Regular boat services operate from the city centre to Bangar. The journey takes under an hour with the

first departure at 6.45am and the last at 5.15pm. While the bridge will save time, my suggestion is to travel to Bangar and on into the park on a boat and with an experienced travel operator such as Hasa Incentives.

The only way to enter the park is via small *sampans* that negotiate several rapids on the journey upriver. One of the park highlights is to walk to the elevated canopy walk. For visitors who don't have time to visit the park, a journey along Brunei River, close to the famous Kampong Ayer, is a great way to see crocodiles and proboscis monkeys while admiring the thick mangrove forests. ■



Waterfall

TRAVEL FILE

Getting There

Royal Brunei Airlines (flyroyalbrunei.com) flies direct to Bandar Seri Begawan twice a day, with an early afternoon flight and a late evening flight. This is a full-service airline with welcoming onboard service.

Where to Stay

There is very little in the region that compares with the 522-room hotel, The Empire Brunei (theempirebrunei.com), seemingly built with no expense spared. Gilded fixtures, chandeliers, and imported marble are noticeable highlights of the grand lobby. The opulence flows through to rooms with classic inspiration and all modern conveniences. It fronts the South China Sea and is surrounded in parts by tropical rainforest just 15 minutes from the airport. There are seven dining and beverage outlets, including local, Japanese, Chinese, and Mediterranean. Visitors to Ulu Temburong can stay in the resort there (uluuluresort.com) or Sumbiling Eco Village (borneoguide.com).

Contacts

The Empire Brunei, Jerudong BG3122, Negara Brunei Darussalam, T: +673 241-8888, theempirebrunei.com. Hasa Incentives (borneoguide.com) can arrange tours along Borneo River and to Ulu Temburong with accommodation provided at Sumbiling Eco Village. For general tourism information on Brunei, contact Brunei Tourism (bruneitourism.com).