No.33

"FOR EVEN THE MOST WELL-TRAVELED VISITORS, VIETNAM BEGS SO MANY QUESTIONS. IT'S A BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY TO BE UNRAVELED."

—from "Vietnam: The Time Is Now," *page 52*

V I E T N A M

PHOTO
GRAPHS *by* *KOHJIRO* *KINNO*

Vietnam's culinary scene is legendary, but more travelers than ever are exploring the country for its golf.

The boom is on: Vietnam has upward of 70 courses in operation and at least 50 more in some stage of development.

Golf in Vietnam has come a long way since Billy Casper entertained U.S. troops on a beach there in the war-torn 1960s.

You're not in Pinehurst anymore.

THE TIME IS NOW

AMONG THE DUNES, RICE PADDIES AND NOODLES OF VIETNAM—THE WORLD'S FASTEST-GROWING GOLF DESTINATION

WORDS *by* SCOTT RESCH

"CAN YOU BELIEVE this fucking terrain?" Hal Phillips shouted from the seat behind me as we bounced in a rickety van past mile after mile of oceanfront dunes. It was 2006, and Phillips, the longtime journalist turned PR rep who had recruited me to come on this press trip to Vietnam, was revealing himself to be a soothsayer and mind reader.

"Oh, wow," I replied as visions of punch shots and pot bunkers danced in my head. "A designer's dream."

We were heading from one central-coast city with UNESCO World Heritage Site status—Hoi An—to another—Hué—and the only thing separating us from the beach where American GIs used to come for wartime R&R about 500 yards away was the kind of sand the surf didn't reach: wind-rumpled, vine-covered and casuarina-dotted, for as far as we could see in each direction.

"Only a matter of time," Phillips said. "The way things are going here, it probably won't be long, either."

He was right. Three years later, I was walking the first collection of fairways sculpted in the region with Jon Tomlinson, general manager of the soon-to-open Montgomerie Links. It would be the first course in a golf boom that has shown no signs of slowing down: With upward of 70 courses in operation and at least 50 more in some stage of development, Vietnam is the fastest-growing golf nation in the world.

By then, I was no longer a wide-eyed visitor. I had moved to Vietnam to work for the media-relations firm Phillips cofounded. And, like Tomlinson, I felt the pulsing energy of being there at the outset of something new—it was finally a more peaceful era in the country's tumultuous history, and the arrival of golf appeared to punctuate its next step forward. It seemed as if we were taking the proverbial baton Billy Casper had left behind in 1966, when the man who also won the U.S. Open that year entertained troops by hitting golf shots on the aforementioned beach during a USO tour.

Casper allegedly fired wedges at Army tractor tires during his show. As the country has sprinted toward golf relevance, however, my targets over the years in Vietnam haven't been so makeshift—low spots on infinity greens, light stanchions through doglegs, and any blade of grass where a conical-hat-wearing caddie has ever encouraged me to roll a putt. The caddies here are mostly young women, and I learned quickly that if you follow their advice, the ball is most likely going in.

Fortunately, playing golf is part of the gig now. But when I founded my own golf-travel business in 2023, booking golf was merely the start—I am also the company historian, culinary director and architectural tour guide. For even the most well-traveled visitors, Vietnam begs so many questions. It's a beautiful mystery to be unraveled.

One client, a pilot, swears the best place to decipher it is outside a noodle shop in one of the major cities while sitting on one of the short plastic chairs that are ubiquitous throughout the country. Do it with a cold beer and a hot bowl of pho, late at night, and you might just get close to understanding something about the culture.

"That memory sits with me," he said the last time I talked to him, more than a year after we'd watched the world go by together from a dilapidated sidewalk in Ho Chi Minh City. "There was just so much going on, so much to absorb."

Learning about the golf scene still starts with Montgomerie Links, which officially opened in 2010 and is still going strong. Fifteen years in, everything about the trailblazing track has matured, while a pair of old, moldy-looking pillboxes—vestiges from a time when the French occupied what was then referred to as Indochina—still make players do a double take before their next swing.

Just as Phillips predicted, the architects came soon after the two of us drooled over those dunes. Along the central coast alone, there are now seven courses in addition to Montgomerie Links. Walk through any of their clubhouses on any given day, and you're likely to hear an Aussie accent or four. But it's the Koreans who come in droves; the gateway to the region, Da Nang, is just a short flight from Seoul, and the facilities here, they'll tell you, are on par with almost anything back home. Korean families send their promising junior players for months at a time—the golf is just as good, at a fraction of the price.

Three courses garner the most attention in this area. Hoiana Shores is only 5 years old but belies its age. Credit goes to Robert Trent Jones Jr., who saw to it that his first foray in Vietnam would be remembered as one large open-bunker system with six holes that come into direct contact with the beach. The result is a championship-caliber venue. Proof came in March, when Hoiana Shores hosted the Women's Amateur Asia-Pacific, an annual R&A-sponsored event that has helped launch the careers of several LPGA stars.

Nine years into its existence, Bà Nà Hills has yet to serve as the site of a big-time tournament, but the Luke Donald–IMG collaboration sure seems like it was built for one. It's nowhere near the ocean—it's about 15 miles inland from the waterfront Hoiana Shores occupies—but its setting is no less remarkable, sitting at the foot of a lush mountain range that feeds water into the many rivers, lakes and streams that shape the picturesque layout. It's a 7,857-yard beast from the tips, where the 287-yard carry required on the par-5 fifth would challenge the former world No. 1 himself. Bà Nà Hills also stands apart from others by offering night golf, which, unsurprisingly, is also gaining popularity in Vietnam.

The Singapore-based developers of Laguna Lăng Cô passed on permanent lights, but Nick Faldo's first signature design is the centerpiece of Vietnam's largest integrated resort. Like Hoiana Shores, it borders the sea and was carved out of the sand. It's very much a Vietnam-style links, including water-buffalo-friendly rice paddies, *Jurassic Park*–like boulders and a bonus par 3 out near the turn that can be converted into the ultimate 19th hole.

"The lads that come out for the Cobra Puma and Mercedes events would party here till the wee hours if we let them," the course's director of golf, Englishman Stephen Banks, told me in July 2024 as we stood on a perfectly manicured green, just a few paces from the froth of breaking waves but at least three par 5s away from the nearest hotel room.

"We set up a bar between the green and the beach there, put up some temporary lights, and it's game on. But, at the end of the day, it's all good, because who are they going to disturb besides the sand crabs, yeah?"

If it sounds strange to hear about beach bashes in a communist country, it should. But, as with Banks' 19th-holers after a few shots of chilled rice wine, Vietnam has loosened up. In my conversations with locals and expats, I often hear, "Vietnam is the most capitalistic communist country in the world." It's hard to argue. In a nation with nearly 100 million people, side hustles feel as abundant as the roughly 70 million motorbikes zipping around crowded city streets—it's easy to make an extra buck for yourself out here.

Duc Tran is testament to that. Since returning to Vietnam 20 years ago—after living in a refugee camp in Malaysia, being adopted by a family in Texas and then bouncing from Central America to Europe to Australia in search of the kitchen's secrets—he's built a mini restaurant empire in Hoi An, an ancient trading port still powered by fishing and farming. It's internationally renowned for an udon-like noodle (cao lau) that can only be made, properly, from water out of a particular Hoi An well.

Tran's three establishments rake it in, and his work ethic is the driving force behind them. But even the man whose inventive fare and magnetic personality has lured the likes of Mick Jagger and Jimmy Buffett admits there's more to this "Livingston Saturday Night" he's now living.

"All the new golf courses and resorts have a lot to do with where I'm at, man," Tran told me one night last year as we sat on the patio of his flagship outlet, Mango Rooms, munching on gently seared tuna and coconut-smoked duck and watching tour boat after tour boat—most blaring music, all adorned with blinking lights—chug along the river next to us. "The town is packed every night now, even during rainy season."

Rainy season is no joke in central Vietnam. It typically starts in September and runs through the end of the year, but it's increasingly bleeding into January. It drastically limits windows of opportunity for even the most hardcore golfers. When it rains here, it pours. *For hours.*

About an hour's flight north, in Hanoi, it can be grim during the early winter months, too. Think lots of cloudy days and morning temps in the 40s. Nevertheless, Hanoi has caught the central coast and become a golf destination on its own. Another Duc—Duc Pham—wouldn't have it any other way. It's part of what makes the capital city home for him.

Several years ago, Pham moved to Brisbane to get his PGA certifications. When he moved back to Hanoi, he quickly became the face of golf in Vietnam. Seemingly overnight, he went from accomplished player to instructor with his own TV show, major Titleist/FootJoy rep, and golf-course photographer skillful enough to make money at it. And he does.

"Sometimes I actually do pinch myself, mate," the ever-smiling 37-year-old recently told me as he steered us toward another new course, Silk Path Dong Trieu, on the quiet outskirts of heaving Hanoi. "As a kid, I dreamed of playing in the Masters, not of having opportunities like this in my own country. You can't dream of something if you don't think it could ever exist."

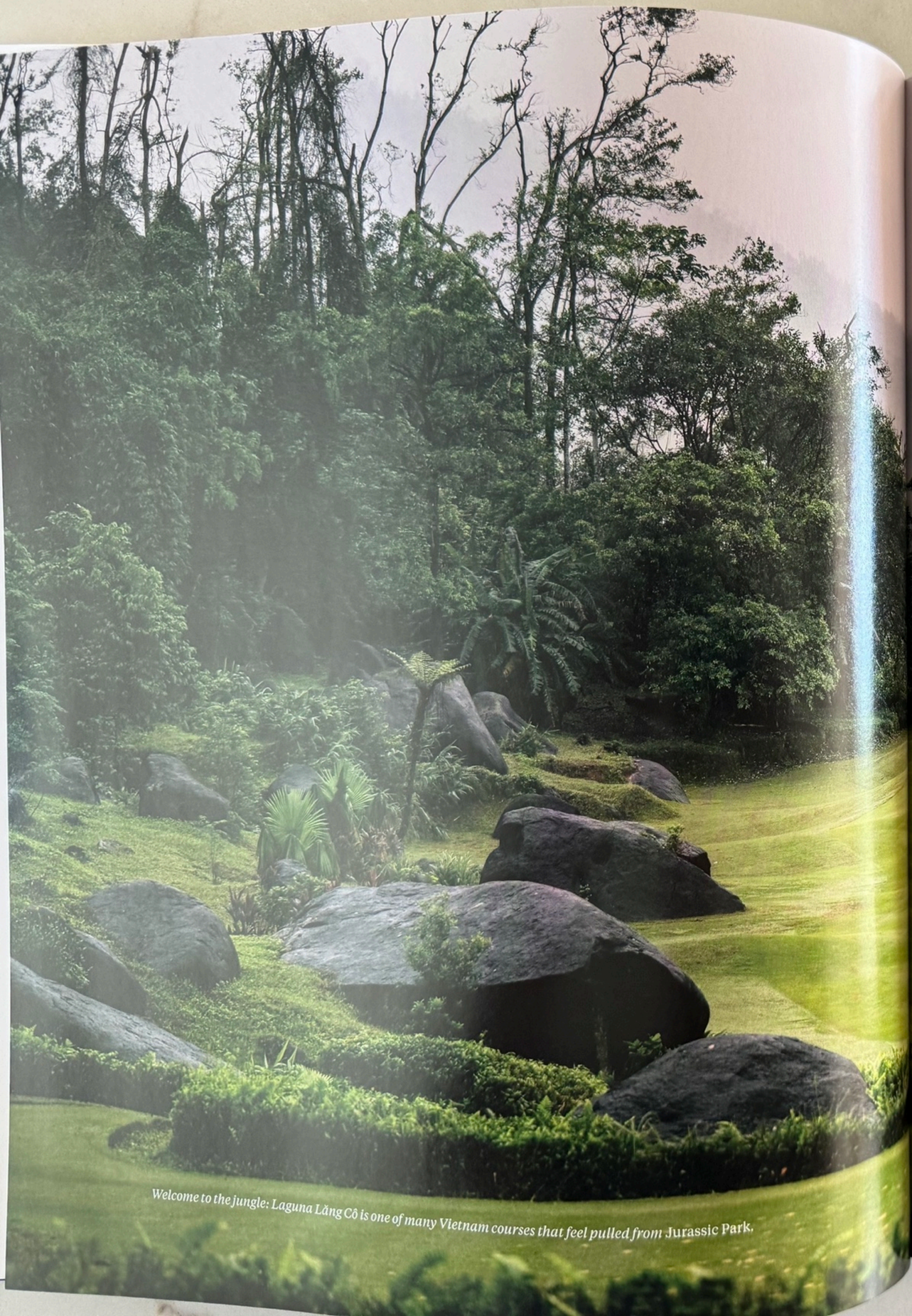
Silk Path is another Faldo concept—his fourth in Vietnam and 10th in Asia—but, contrary to Laguna Lăng Cô, it's landlocked and hilly. Majestic pines line some fairways, while lakes border others, all leading to some of the most severe multi-tiered greens I've seen in the country.

"This course is going to eat most players up," Pham said. "But I think it's pretty cool." He's not alone. The course was packed for a Wednesday, as was the driving range when we tried to warm up.

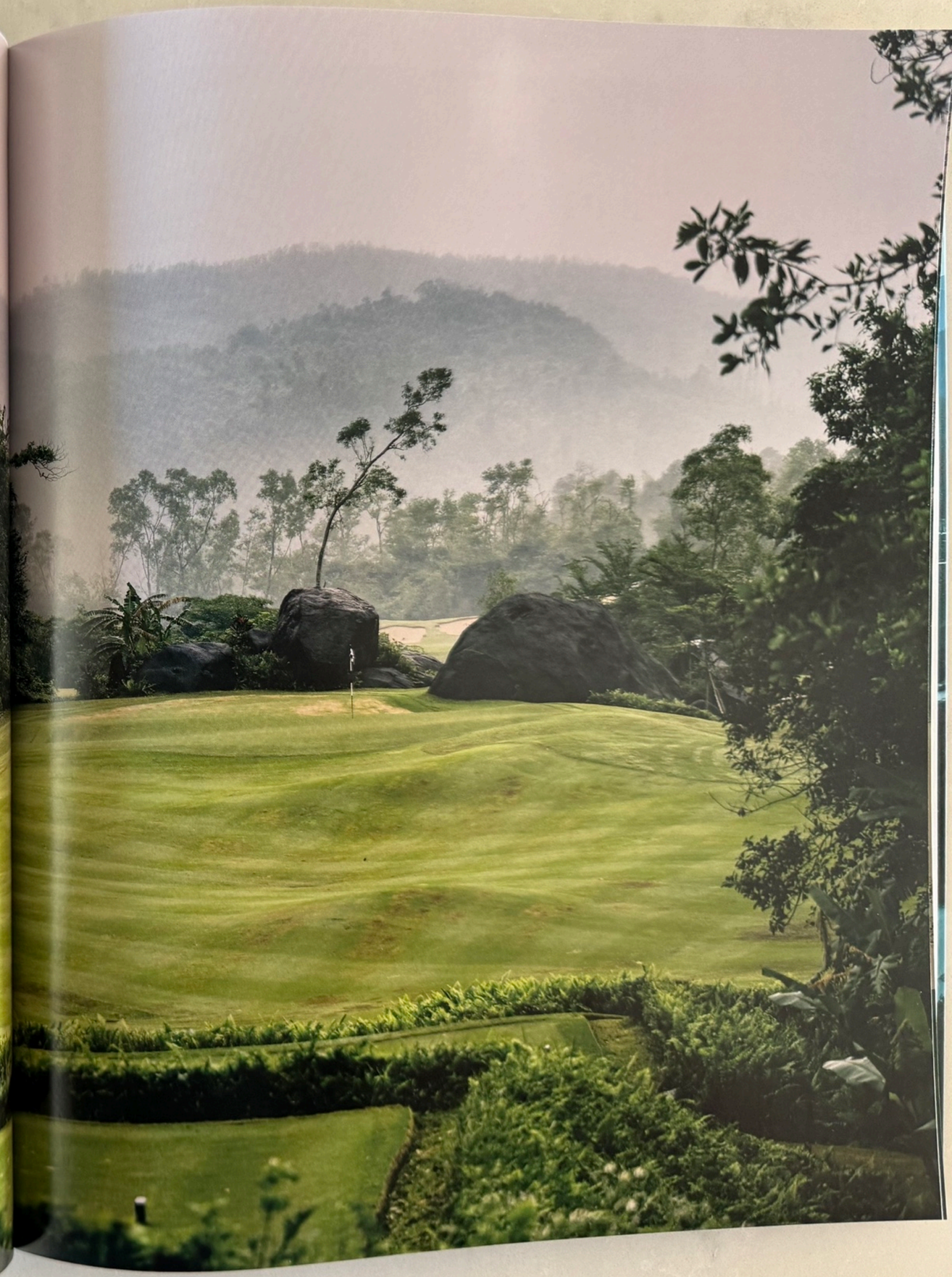
While the war ripped still-visible scars into the people and landscape, I have no memories of it; I was born the year it ended. But I've read many of the books and watched most of the movies. I understand that for a long time, no one wanted to go anywhere near Vietnam, let alone the north. If you were sent to fight, and you managed to make it home, you probably weren't ever choosing to go back. And those who grew up learning about this slice of Southeast Asia based on what they saw on the nightly news in the 1960s and '70s also steered clear.

Even my father, who managed to evade deployment in 1970 due to high blood pressure, had a hard time accepting my invitation to visit in 2007. For him and so many others of his generation, the word "Vietnam" had nothing but negative connotations.

Eventually he made the trek over, and he was glad he did. He saw the Vietnam that I know, that Duc Pham and Duc Tran know, the one that more and more golfers are curious about: a nation of kind people, stunning landscapes, some of the best food on the planet and still so much potential lying out in those dunes. •

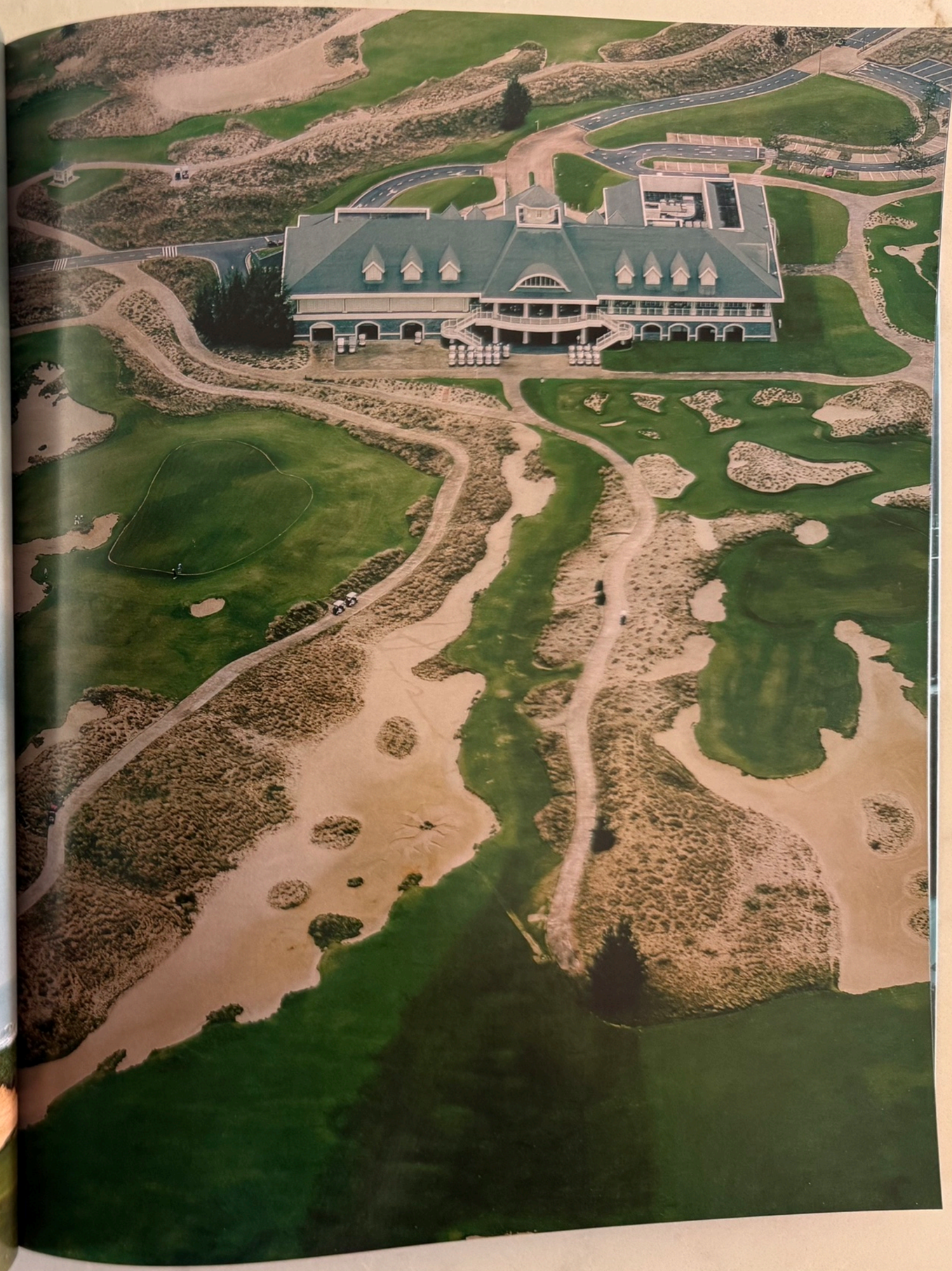
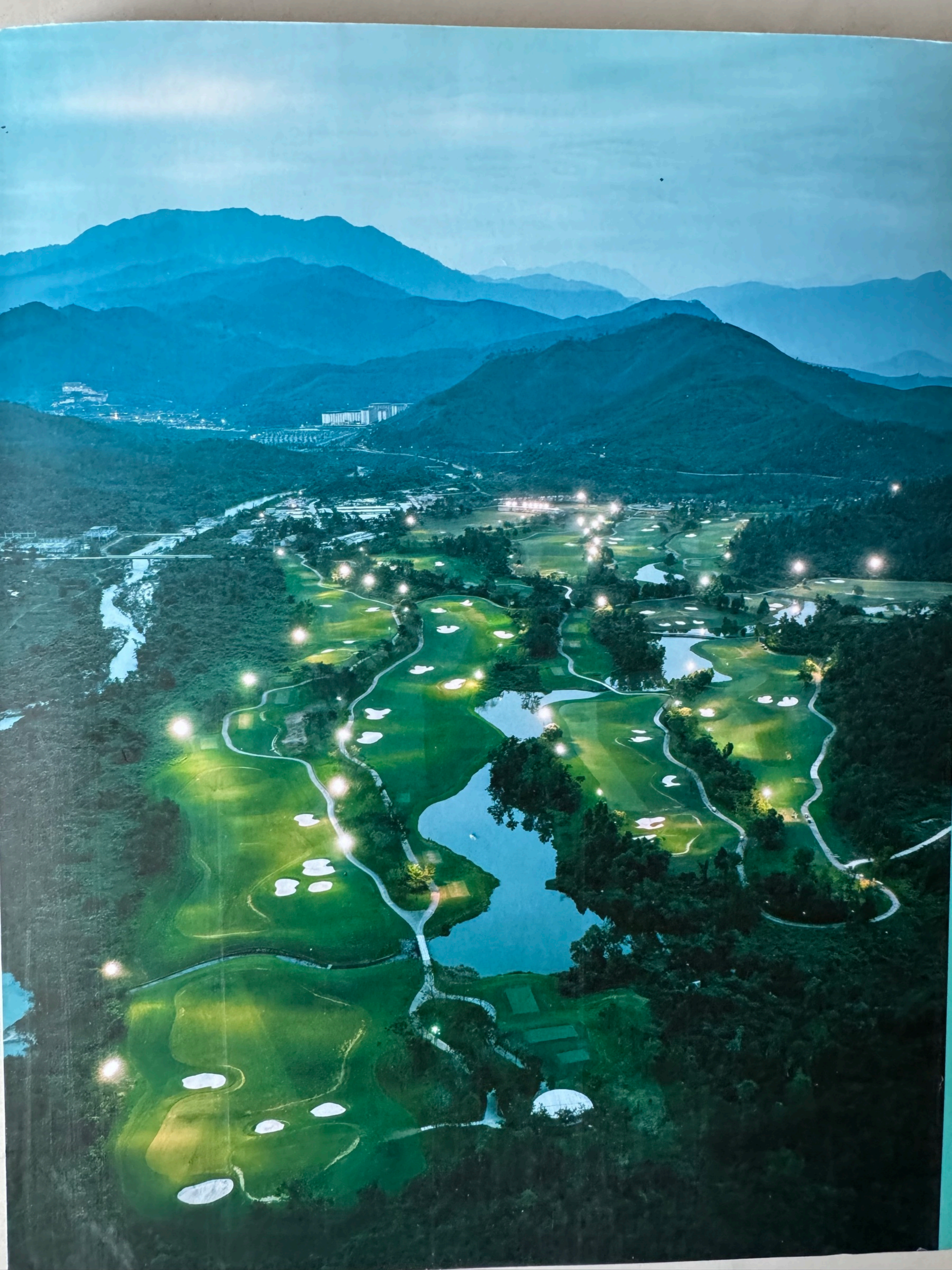


Welcome to the jungle: Laguna Lăng Cô is one of many Vietnam courses that feel pulled from Jurassic Park.



"Sometimes I actually do pinch myself, mate." Duc Pham (this page, far right) *grew up believing golf opportunities would have to come outside of his native country. Now he has his own television show in Vietnam and can play Long Biên Golf Course* (facing, top) *in his hometown of Hanoi. He could also join the tourists descending on Hoiana Shores* (this page, top and bottom), *Laguna Lăng Cô* (facing, bottom left) *and Bà Nà Hills* (facing, middle).

It's no surprise architects are rushing to Vietnam—the terrain at places like Hoiana Shores is the sandy stuff of their dreams.



The game looks a little different at Long Biên (opposite) *and Bà Nà Hills* (this page). *And for the curious golfer, that's exactly the point.*