

ESCAPE SABAH



Aerial view of the
Shangri-La Rasa
Ria Resort.

Golf In The Land Below The Wind

BY PAUL MYERS

One good reason to visit Sabah is its location. Once known as “The land below the wind”, a reference to Sabah’s location below the typhoon belt that often brings devastating storms to the coastlines of the Philippines, Vietnam and South China, it enjoys a moderate climate that enables golf to be played all year

It's just a stone's throw across the South China Sea, only as far from Singapore as Bangkok, closer than Bali and easily accessible from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and other parts of South-East Asia.

But too often Malaysia's most eastern state of Sabah on the island of Borneo is off the golf and tourism radar.

It shouldn't be. Sabah has more than its share of attractions, of which golf is just one. A pristine environment, broad mix of cultures and religions, stunning landscapes and seascapes, intriguing wildlife, a rich colonial history and relaxed way of life make Sabah one of the most appealing destinations in South-East Asia.

And the golf? It's comparable to anything else in Malaysia and better than most high-profile

RESORT DESTINATIONS IN ASIA.

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the wind", a reference to Sabah's location below the typhoon belt that often brings devastating storms to the coastlines of the Philippines, Vietnam and south China, it enjoys a moderate climate that enables golf to be played all year.

The capital, Kota Kinabalu, known as KK, has less than half a million residents, is only 10 minutes from the airport, sits handsomely beside the turquoise waters of the South China Sea and has a championship golf course on its doorstep.

Recognising their potential to substantially increase international golf tourism, Sabah's two leading golf resorts have put aside any competitive differences to form a destination-marketing program called Sabah Golf (www.sabah-golf.com).

Sabah Golf, comprising Sutera Harbour Resort and the Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort, the latter being home to Dalit Bay Golf Club, showcases some of the most friendly, accessible and enjoyable golf in South-East Asia. It means Sabah

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won't be flying under the golf tourism radar any longer.

The two courses hosted the World Amateur Inter-Team Golf Championship in April, at the same time as a group of 33 tour operators from Europe, Australia and other markets were visiting the properties before the International Association of Golf Tourism Operators inaugural convention in South East Asia, held in Kuala Lumpur.

Their verdict? A big thumbs-up for

Night golf is available only at Sutera Harbour



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Sabah as an enticing golf tourism destination. As any tour operator will attest, most golf tourists are looking for something different and Sabah certainly fits this bill.

"The golf is great, but what is also appealing about Sabah is the nature," said German tour operator, Manfred Rauno. "Sabah isn't as well known as some other golf destinations, but when people learn about its wonderful flora, fauna and natural attractions – as well as the golf – I am sure they will want to come."

Manfred Rauno believes Sabah is an ideal add-on destination for golf tourists visiting Singapore, the Malay peninsular and other South East Asian markets.

"Combined with a visit to major cities like Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, it's a great fit," Manfred Rauno said.

The two major golf resorts certainly meet the criteria standards of international golf travellers.

Sutera Harbour, a large complex that, as its name implies, nestles on its own mini harbour on the edge of Kota Kinabalu,

boasts 27 holes of championship golf designed by former Australian tour pro, Graham Marsh.

Host of two stages of the One Asia qualifying school in 2012 and 2013, Sutera Harbour's golf credentials are considerable. Split into three nines – Garden, Lakes and Heritage – every hole plays within sight of the sea, the city or the resort hotels. Despite a relatively flat layout, Marsh's clever use of mounds and bunkering – combined with man-made water – makes it an interesting and enjoyable test of golf. Coconut palms present a visual differentiation between holes and frequent views across the South China Sea to the Manukan Islands, as well as to Kota Kinabalu itself, inject a scenic element to the complex.

Sutera Harbour also has the only night golf in East Malaysia, providing a pleasant outlet during the mild evenings that characterise this part of the tropics and, if you're willing, enabling 17 hours of golf to be played each day!

Among the best holes are the short

par-4, 24th hole on the Garden layout that plays right beside the water and has a precariously placed green. Miss it to the left and you're ball is dead; play right and you'll have an awkward chip to the pin.

There are also many beautiful holes on the Lakes and Heritage layouts, perhaps none better than the par-3 sixth hole on the Heritage course that requires an accurate tee shot to avoid water in front and heavy bunkering on either side of the green.

British PGA professional Neil Douglas runs the Golf Academy Borneo at Sutera Harbour, conducts lessons for guests of the resort. There are also two three and five-day golf school programs to sharpen up any golfer's game, whatever their level. Sutera Harbour's green fees for 18 holes are MYR250 on weekdays (approx. SGD100 for hotel guests and MYR330 (approx. SGD134) at weekends.

Just 45 minutes along the coast from Kota Kinabalu, Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort is home to Dalit Bay Golf Club, situated at the entrance to the property. This beautiful water and woodlands course rests in the

shadow of the 4095 metre-Mt Kinabalu, the highest mountain in South East Asia.

Set within the 400-acre resort that nudges the South China Sea at Pantai Dalit beach, the golf course was designed by another Australian, Ted Parslow. Bordered by the Tambalang and Mangkabong rivers with stunning vistas to Mt Kinabalu in the distance, it offers a classic wetland golf experience with water on every hole.

The course can be easily walked, or golfers may take carts if they wish. The mountain scenery provides a perfect backdrop for an enjoyable round at any time of year.

The signature hole, the par-3 11th, plays across the mouth of the Tambalang River, right beside the South China Sea. Like every hole on the course, a precise shot is needed to avoid a wet result.

An Australian PGA member, Aaron Johnston, is Dalit Bay's professional and an accredited AAA instructor.

He nominates the tricky par-4, 13th hole,

measuring 361 metres from the back tees, as his favourite. The dogleg left hole is set among natural mangrove wetlands of the Tambalang river, which runs along its full length. A daunting tee shot over natural wetlands to a narrowing fairway guarded by a bunker on the right-hand side is a real challenge. Magnificent views of Mt Kinabalu await as you hit into the green.

The green fee for 18 holes at Dalit Bay is MYR320 per person (approx. SGD128 including buggy and insurance) and MYR260 (approx. SGD105) for nine holes.

A special highlight of the Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort is its nature reserve, established in 1996 in collaboration with the State Wildlife Department of Sabah. The reserve protects endangered species of fauna in Sabah and species that are endemic to the region.

Here visitors can see at first hand how orang-utans and other species are being protected from human intervention. Typically, young orang-utans are brought

into the reserve where they are fed and nurtured until able to fend for themselves, when they are released back into their natural habitat.

ABOUT SABAH

Located closer to the Philippines than the Malay peninsular, Sabah is a potpourri of cultures and religions. Its three million inhabitants comprise 32 ethnic groups that live in peaceful harmony. Almost a third of the population is Filipino or Indonesian and 10 percent are of Chinese origin.

Formerly known as British North Borneo, Sabah and much larger neighbouring Sarawak are Malaysia's two most eastern states on the island of Borneo. They joined the Malay federation after North Borneo achieved independence from Britain in 1963.

STAY & PLAY PACKAGES

■ Suter Harbour Resort: from MYR 680/room/night (approx. SGD 274) for two

Beautiful backdrop at the Suter Harbour Resort.



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people, based on minimum three-night stay with buffet breakfasts, two rounds of golf each and spa treatment.

■ Shangri-La Rasa Ria Resort: from MYR 1195/room/night (approx. SGD 480) for two people, based on minimum three-night stay, two rounds of golf each and return airport transfers.

GETTING THERE/WHAT TO DO

Air Asia and Silkair fly direct to Kota Kinabalu from Singapore. As well as golf, among Sabah's other highlights are Kinabalu Park, which in 2000 became Sabah's first World Heritage site, and to Mt Kinabalu itself; a steam train trip on the 36-mile North Borneo Railway, which first operated in 1914; and a short boat trip from Suter Harbour Resort to Manukan Island, the second largest island in the Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine National Park.

For more information, visit www.sabah-golf.com ©



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