

It's a hell of a course

By Brad Ewart

CALCUTTA

If there is a worse place in the world to play golf than Calcutta, it must be in hell.

The Royal Calcutta Golf Course, site of this year's Indian Open, is situated in the middle of one of the world's poorest and dirtiest cities. Calcutta looks like a holocaust after a nuclear explosion with people dying in the streets from starvation and disease.

Forty years ago this was a thriving metropolis. Now it's the garbage dump of Asia where a corrupt local Marxist government foolishly spends tax dollars.

Most of the Asian PGA Tour golfers stay in the Taj Bengal Hotel. It is like an oasis in a desert of filth. The rooms are clean, the food is good and you are safe from the reality of Calcutta.

The famous golf course is the second oldest in the world outside of the United Kingdom. The design is tremendous but the conditions are appalling. The greens are as bumpy as a gravel road, the fairways mostly weeds and there is no such thing as a good lie.

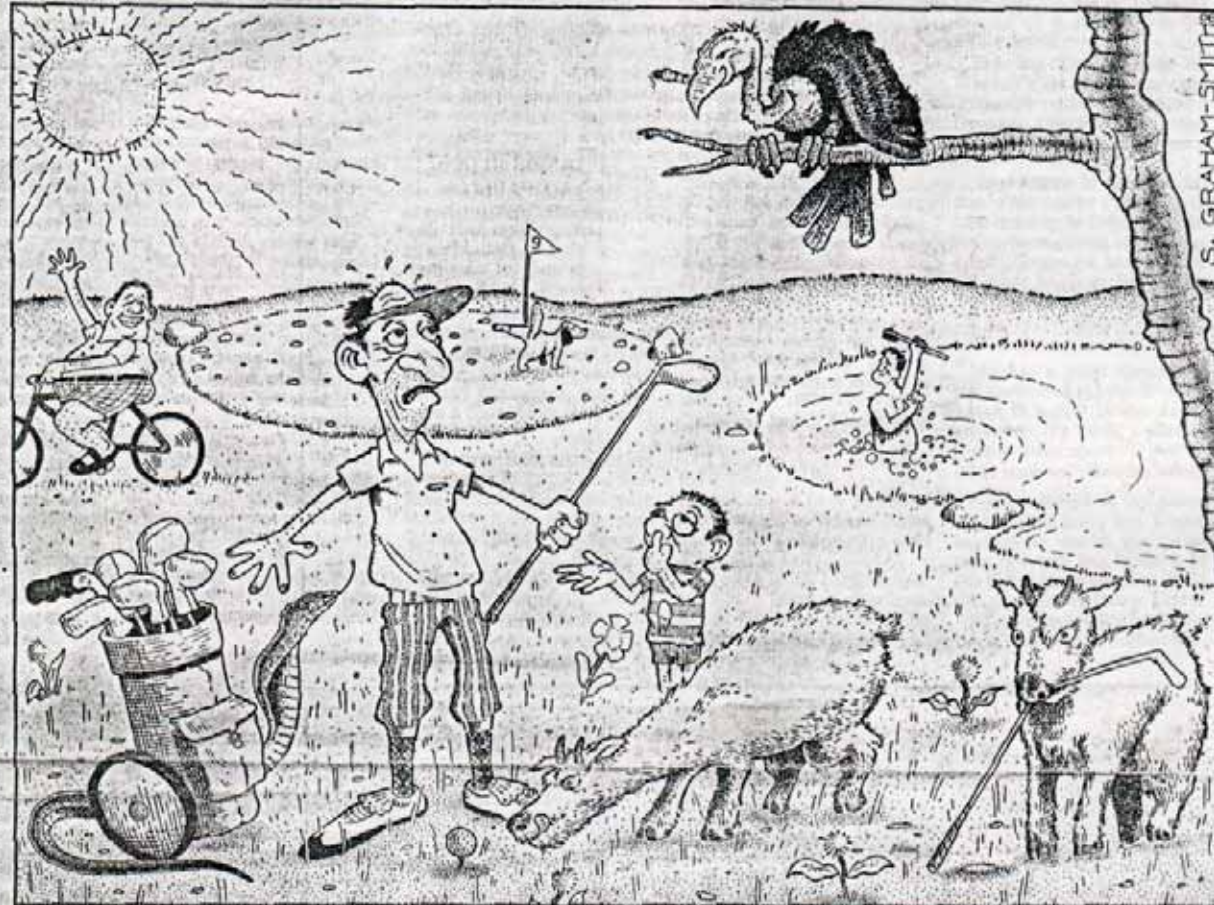
There are many natural hazards. Goats and dogs wander freely throughout, cobras hide in the rough and the local residents walk about as if this were a public park. The Indian people are oblivious to the golfers and the lakes are a place for them to wash their clothes and bathe.

Try concentrating on a shot while six goats cross your path, two men ride across the tee on a bicycle and a baby cries while its mother does her laundry. Quiet please! I'm trying to putt.

It gets worse. Golf balls are a rare commodity. Don't turn your back on them because as soon as you do, another ball is gone from your bag. Keep your wallet in your back pocket and don't take your watch off. Don't drink the water because in a week you will be dead.

The greens on the course are cut by hand with an old-fashioned manual lawn mower. The fairways are trimmed by the 200 or more

Calcutta golf hazards include cobras and goats



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goats that feed on the course. Women collect the leaves with pointed sticks while old men pick the long grass in the rough by hand. There are no rakes in the sand traps but occasionally a man will roam the course smoothing out the sand.

Vultures circle overhead by the hundreds and they live in the trees by the ninth hole. Vultures are a sign of death. Maybe they are waiting for a golfer to die from the sweltering heat or from the frustration of playing here.

The caddies are like the vultures — always waiting for scraps the golfers might throw their way.

Most of the caddies are young boys who have never been to school. They start working almost as soon as they are old enough to walk. (In this part of the world begging is a full-time job and many of these people are experts).

Most caddies wear no shoes and their clothes are tattered and torn. They smell. Some understand basic English but most only speak Hindi or Bengali. These caddies carry the bag and that's it.

There are no clubs or balls for sale in the pro shop. It does have some old hats and plastic tees for

sale, but forget about buying a new Titleist.

During the week of the Indian Open, the members chase after the touring pros for anything they can buy. The locker room becomes a golf discount house where the pros unload everything from practice balls to used golf shirts.

The golf course is a monster at 7,177 yards from the back tees. Some of the holes are actually well-designed tests of skill. The only problem is that the poor conditions and the distractions take away from any positive marks the course might receive.

For a course that first opened in 1829, it has done well to survive. However, as the disease of the outside world makes its way over the course, it is only a matter of time before the course is completely infected and forced to close.

Originally there were 36 holes but it has been reduced to 27. In its present shape, a reduction to zero won't be a cause for mourning.

Brad Ewart is a Vancouver freelance writer. He was in Calcutta along with several Canadian professional golfers who competed in the Indian Open, part of the Asian tour.