



1 Top-class: The Bluffs with The Grand hotel complex in the background.

2 Links feel: The opening of the course had bagpipers in attendance.

3 Hazards galore: Sand dunes and bunkers, thickets, water and other elements give this course outstanding character.

VIETNAM'S budding golf industry received a yet another huge lift with the recent opening of a Greg Norman-designed course – The Bluffs Ho Tram Strip.

The Australian, also known as the Great White Shark, was on hand to oversee the official handover of his 87th design, which he termed: “a true links golf course”.

And such is the high regard in which Norman holds this course that he said it had the potential to establish itself “among the top courses in the world”.

The two-time British Open winner added: “We were fortunate in many respects because as you walk down the fairways and you look at all the undulations and the greens settings — most of those are exactly the way the original form of the land was.

“We work hard on trying to create the least disturbance as possible to the natural lay of the land and here at the Bluffs we achieved that to a great extent because of the terrain we had to work with – it was just outstanding.”

Fellow Australian, Ben Styles, who has been at the Bluffs since day-one and is now its general manager, said: “It’s no secret that Mr Norman loves this style of golf course — a links course – one where the ball rolls, and where mounds and ridges can be used to a player’s advantage. It’s just such a natural golf course.”

Situated about a two-hour’s drive southeast of Ho Chi Minh City, the Bluffs Ho Tram Strip layout has been crafted over and around huge sand dunes along the South China Sea.

One of Norman's best courses yet

The new Bluffs Ho Tram Strip adds class to Vietnam's growing golf industry

Some of those who have been fortunate enough to play the course say that its setting and views are reminiscent of southwest Ireland.

Speaking of his design team that is based in Florida, Norman added: “We begin each new golf course design with a least-disturbance approach. Our team dedicates time and effort to finding the most desirable natural features of a site and incorporates them into the routing.

“These elements include streams, rock features, vegetation and undulating topography that can provide a course with its own unique feel when incorporated into the playing strategy.”

Turning to the Bluffs, he added: “This is one of only two pieces of land of this quality I have ever been given to work with – the other being Doonbeg (in Ireland).

“I’m a firm believer in using what Mother Nature gives us on a particular site and this one has it all.”

From the back, or championship tees, the tract stretches 7,007 yards, with the blues tees 6,287yds, the white 5,615 yards and the red (ladies’) 4,785yds.

The highest point on the course is a mere 50 metres above sea level – the 15th green. This is a picturesque hole with the sea serving as the backdrop. It is a par-3 that measures 257 yards for the pros and 207 yards from the blue tee. And because of its length and the accuracy needed to get it onto the green, it has an Index rating of four.

The 172-yard par-3 4th, is another of the pretty holes on the this course. The green sits on a bluff that has dense forest behind it, with the sea and 20-storey Grand Ho Tram Strip Hotel also in the picture – the latter having been opened in July 2013 and is Vietnam’s first international luxury casino resort.

Another of the stand-out holes is the 412-yard par-4 8th. This beauty plays downhill to a

fairway that is split by a natural water feature.

“We actually had a couple of holes designed down on the water (sea),” said Norman, “but because of future development (possibilities) — that’s obviously of higher value, where you’re going to get a greater return on that property — we were asked to shift those holes away from there.

“It would’ve been great to get a hole or two down there, but there are great links golf courses in England that are not (right) on the water as well.”

The Bluffs Ho Tram Strip is just the first phase of the multi-million dollar Ho Tram Strip development that is being undertaken by the Ho Tram Project Company, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Canada-based Asian Coast Development Ltd.

When complete, the Ho Tram Strip will boast four 5-star hotels, an ocean front condominium tower and a luxury villa community on the golf course.

The course itself could well turnout to be an ideal venue for Tour events, said Norman.

“When we built the golf course we did not do it with hosting a tournament in mind.

“But there are a lot of things going for this place in that regard now, which could make it an ideal Tour venue.

“The infrastructure is here, with the golf course and the magnificent hotel in The Grand across the street.

“When players go somewhere, what we like to have are the creature comforts and you certainly have those here,” added the 59-year-old, who has been inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame.

At the launch of the Bluffs, Norman had New Zealander and 2005 US Open champion Michael Campbell and two-time European Tour winner Robert Rock, for company in a charity exhibition match with two of Vietnam’s leading women’s players — LPGA Tour pro Tang Thi Nhung and US collegiate golfer Ngo Bao Nghi.

With Norman sidelined due to an injury sustained while sawing trees in his yard at his Florida home, Rock and Tang won the match 2-and-1.

And after going around the course, Rock said: “It’s just spectacular. It’s definitely challenging, but it’s also fair. I could play here every day. That’s not something you can say about most courses.”

Indeed, there is a lot that distinguishes the Bluffs from other courses and perhaps none more so than the fact that this layout is on its way to becoming one of Asia’s best, if not the world.

