

Herald Sun

Friday 10.08.12

JUNGLE SURFING

Hanging out in the Daintree

Escape.

DESTINATIONS, DREAMS & DEALS



ONLY in China, surely, could someone hope to build one of the world's largest golf resort complexes on a bed of ancient lava rock, right on the crater of an extinct volcano.

What's more, only in China could they even contemplate completing the task — building 10 of Asia's best golf courses and a five-star hotel and mineral spring spa to service them — in just 18 months. Augusta National — the US Masters' home — took longer than three years to construct.

A Chinese battalion of 25,000 workers worked around the clock, enabling Mission Hills Haikou, the world's second largest golf resort, to open last year on the island of Hainan. It would be the biggest golf resort on the planet if Mission Hills hadn't already built 12 courses on one enormous site across the sea in mainland China.

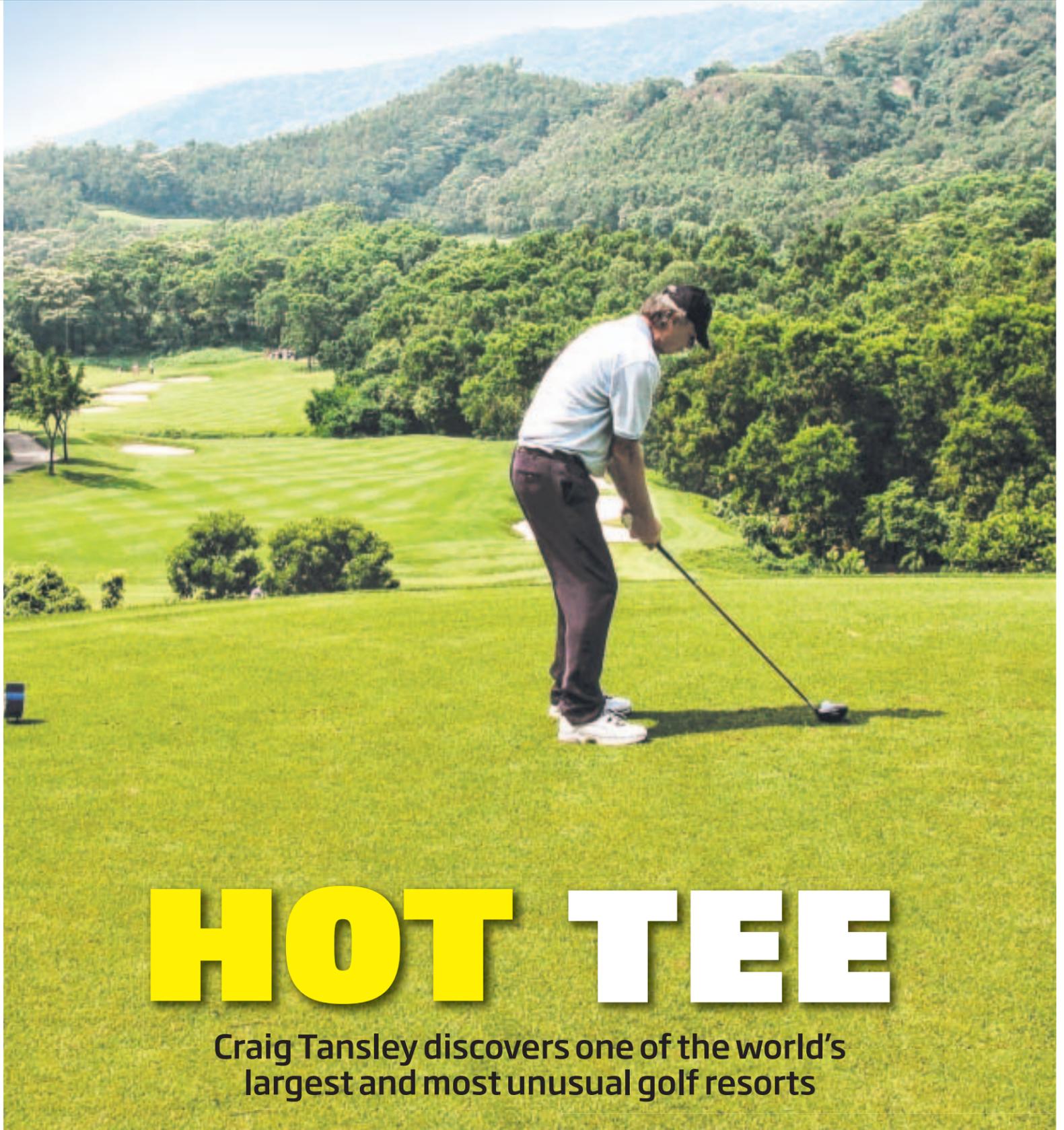
The new resort has leisure travellers in mind; you can't buy a membership and you'll never have to worry about which days you can't play because of competitions because they don't have any (well, except when Tiger Woods and co head down every two years to play the World Cup on the site's premier course, Blackstone).

Even the dress code is not too stringent. When I arrived at the island resort, the staff were draped in frangipani leis, dancing the hula and serving coconut juice, straight from the nut. But then Hainan is marketed as China's version of Hawaii; it shares the same climate, located as it is on the same latitude. There's even surf nearby, or if you'd rather stay at the resort, try out the signature wave pool by its smooth, sandy beach.

BUT there are a few things that even Hawaii can't boast, such as Asia's largest natural mineral springs. With Haikou being a volcanic hotspot — the Earth's mantle is far thinner than just about anywhere else in China — Mission Hills dug 800m to bring up mineral-rich, hot water distributed daily into 168 spa pools.

And then there's the golf, of course; at Mission Hills you get to hit small white balls where volcanoes once roared.

If you slice or hook badly at Mission Hills there's a fair chance that even if you find your ball, it'll be scuffed beyond repair. Sharp lava rocks line most fairways, especially on Mission Hills' toughest challenge, the Blackstone course, voted by numerous



HOT TEE

Craig Tansley discovers one of the world's largest and most unusual golf resorts

golf publications as Asia's best championship course. It's long: 7130m if you play from the back markers like Tiger does. But it's a thing of beauty; steer your way past fairways lined with sharp lava, past sprawling bunkers and lakes and on to severely sloping greens and you'll know you've played well if you manage par.

Courses vary in degrees of difficulty meaning even complete novices can play. I find my feet on the generously wide

fairways of the Sandbelt Trails course before even considering taming Blackstone (it remains a wild, unbroken beast).

SOME of the 10 courses are also lit at night, giving you the option of avoiding the heat of the day. If you time your run, you might also see Hollywood stars such as Matthew McConaughey, Hugh Grant and Samuel L. Jackson during Mission Hill's Star Trophy Pro-Am.

It'd be feasible to stay at Mission Hills for a week doing nothing but playing golf and relaxing in the mineral spring. There are also world-class restaurants plus shopping arcades, bars and an entertainment complex soon to be completed). But, the local area also boasts some of China's best swimming beaches, Ming Dynasty-era tombs and temples, island forts, a buzzing provincial capital, thermal springs and rainforest trekking.



THE DEAL

Getting there: Fly to Haikou with China Southern Airlines from Melbourne from \$1067 return. Fares valid for sale until September 19. Visit flychinasouthern.com
Staying there: Stay seven days/six nights in a deluxe room with breakfasts, eight rounds of golf, access to Mineral Springs and transfers to the airport for \$1997 a person. Visit missionhillschina.com