

## **Ukrainian World Golf Challenge - Mission Hills – China**

The 6<sup>th</sup> of September finally dawned, long wait over, our intrepid adventurers boarded the flight at Heathrow (having imbibed a fair skin-full) and touched down in steamy Hong Kong, 12 hours later. After a trouble free transfer to our 5 star hotel in Kowloon, we met some of our German and Australian opposition in the bar. Suitably refreshed, we hopped on the ferry over to Hong Kong Island. This was the cheapest thing on the whole trip – 25p for the 20 minute crossing – everything else was mega expensive.

Away from the bustling shopping and business seafront section, we found a little bar in a maze of teeming and colourful streets. Several beers later, back on the ferry to our hotel in Kowloon were we met up with the Czech contingent and carried on socializing. Around midnight, when most sensible people had retired for the night, we decided to sample the local night-life and made a bee-line for the waterfront bars. We sat enthralled by an astounding laser light show, flashing between Hong Kong and Kowloon. Mick, notoriously hard to impress, commented that it was just like Chinatown in Manchester. No Mick, you don't see spectacular skyscrapers flashing coloured lasers a mile across the South China Sea in Manchester, nor is the temperature 85° with 80% humidity at 3am!

And so to bed at ~ 4am, only to be woken half an hour later by a raddled Melly who had had one of his 'adventures' – I'll let him explain?!

After very little sleep, it was time to board the bus to China, stopping at the Lowu shopping centre in Shenzen en-route. As you may have guessed, we spent most of the shopping trip in the air-conditioned bar. We needed to take on liquid as the temperature outside was astonishing – absolutely unbearable for more than a few minutes, a foretaste of things to come. Shortly later we arrived at Mission Hills, where we were greeted by the other (better) half of Team UGAGB – Paul and Sara – with, you've guessed it, more beer.

At 7pm we all assembled for the opening ceremony. Lavish banquet, introductory speeches and more drinks, also a minute silence for absent friends – Con Medway who was instrumental in planning this event and sadly passed away last year.

The hotel complex was very plush, 7 star plus. Mission Hills has 14000 staff, about 10 to every guest. Our every need was catered for, at a price, a bit nonplussing for two

boys from Oldham. However we struggled through and made full use of – err?- the bars.

Monday morning and it was time to play our first (practice) round at the Dongguan complex, about 30 minutes bus ride from the Shenzhen complex where we were based. Team GB played as a foursome. Each pair shared a buggy and each player had a caddie, invaluable for choosing correct clubs and lining up putts. The course (Leadbetter) was extremely difficult, up and down hills, narrow fairways with jungle 5 yards from the first cut. If your ball went in the rough (jungle) there was no chance of playing out, not that you'd want to with all manner of nasty, poisonous beasts lurking. For me the biggest difficulty was the heat and humidity. I found it very draining and had to resort to drinking ion replacement fluids, something of a shock to my system. The courses couldn't be played without buggies, with several hundred yards between greens and tees. We all completed the round with reasonable scores and only a few lost balls each, but we were playing with allies and there was no pressure.

This changed the next day as the competition proper began, again in the Dongguan complex on the Annika course. I was in the first group with 3 team presidents – Australia, Canada and Germany, with whom I shared a buggy, so the pressure was really on. I started badly and then got worse, scoring just 3 points on the first 9 holes. Fearing a really embarrassing score, I pulled out all the stops and managed 12 on the back nine for a total of 15, bad but not the worst score of the day. My play was badly affected by heat and hangover and also my caddie didn't seem well and stayed in the buggy for most of the round – maybe she could face searching for my lost balls. Fortunately the rest of our team came in with solid scores, Paul won his flight, as he did every day, and we finished the day in joint 4<sup>th</sup> place, level with archrivals Canada.

The next day and for the rest of the tournament, we played at the Shenzhen complex (Vijay course). These courses were much more forgiving than at Dongguan, flatter but still tricky, with jungle at least 10 yards from the fairway and water on practically every hole. The course suited me much better and I managed to improve by 10 points on my first round. Again the rest of the team scored well and we consolidated our position in the rankings.

The third competition round was on the Els course, long and straight and perhaps the easiest course we played but still more difficult than most of the courses we play at home. One particular hole springs to mind, with a hundred metre drop into a gorge off the tee, inviting you to open your shoulders and blast it 300 yards down the fairway below. Sadly, I hooked my drive into the jungle. I couldn't believe it when my caddie set off to look for the ball (something they always did) – I told her to forget it – it was 100 yards up the mountain. Fortunately things improved, the weather cooled and torrential rain started. While the other players took shelter, I stood in the middle of the fairway, arms outstretched, my face to the sky – the best shower I had all week. Re-invigorated and in my element I went on to record my best score of the week – 32. With this and good scores from the rest of the team, we moved up to joint 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the rankings. I

was runner up in my flight, behind Myron Panczuk of Germany who topped the flight every day but the last. My joy at being presented with the prize was only slightly diminished by being introduced as representing Alcoholics Anonymous.

Saturday, 14<sup>th</sup> September, and the final deciding round of the tournament was upon us. This was held on the World Cup Course, nice wide fairways and jungle well hacked back. I doubt if professionals could have played on the courses at Dongguan, lost balls on every hole. I played in a foursome with 3 Australians who were applying the pressure from the start. However, I started well, scoring 18 on the first 9. Unfortunately the heat started to take effect – this was probably the hottest and steamiest day of the week – and I only scored 6 on the back 9. The rest of the team did better – Sara 30, Mick 32 and Paul a magnificent 43, giving us a team average for the day of 32.25, surely the best of the day.

Hopes high, we sat together at the closing dinner, Sara and Paul in their evening finery. Following another lavish feast and even more drinks, the final results were announced. First the individual winners – Andrij Melnyk Jnr. (Czech Republic, 3 handicap, 16 years old) won the Gross Stroke trophy and inevitably – the most consistent player of the week – our own Paul Allen was crowned Stableford Champion. Then the team placings were announced, starting with last place. Imagine our mounting excitement as place after place was announced and we moved up the rankings. Germany, who had been leading all week, slipped to 4<sup>th</sup> place, the Czechs, probably the best players (all low handicappers) came in 3<sup>rd</sup>. Great tension, atmosphere could be cut with a knife, deathly silence etc. etc. followed by the announcement of UGAGB in 2<sup>nd</sup> place. Elation, team jumps up, everyone cheers. The trophy was presented to me and I rightly gave it to Paul to hold aloft.

As you may have guessed, Canada won the team trophy, reclaiming the Moose in the process for the first time since Marbella in 2001. However, in our defence, they had to win the tournament to beat us and had a small select team, unlike the large teams of 'mixed' ability they have fielded in the past.

The final announcement of the night was the venue of the next Ukrainian World Golf Challenge – The Czech Republic in August 2015.

Many thanks to Sara, our de-facto team captain, who despite being a beginner, scored well in every round, Mick, with a solid scoring performance on an 18 handicap, and especially Paul – magnificent all week. The society should be well proud of their performance. Mick and I (usually I), maintained our record of being the last people to leave the bar every night. Celebrations lasted well into the small hours and we staggered off to bed, tired but elated.

Sadly, the next morning heralded our departure from Paradise. We boarded the bus back through the border to Hong Kong, with interminable queues at Customs. Paul and Sara suffered more than most with their mountain of luggage which they had to carry

through. In retrospect, I feel guilty for not assisting them, somehow it didn't occur to me at the time, as we were separated by a crowd of similarly beleaguered tourists. The Czechs had a spare room in the hotel which they gave to Mick and me to freshen up. We were supposed to have gone to the airport but our flight wasn't until 11pm so it was back to the bar where it had all started exactly 8 days earlier, same round but different people. That's when we last saw Sara and Paul, as we shot off to our favourite haunts on the waterfront and happy hour drinks. We shared two taxis to the airport with our CzechMates, Oleg and his son Taras, not without mishap, losing touch with each other in the midst of a spectacular thunderstorm.

Touching down in chilly London half a day later, the whole experience somehow seemed like a fabulous dream, a different world. Pleasant memories come flooding back – the splendid opulence of our hotels, the spectacular cityscapes and the lush tropical beauty of the courses. I'll never forget trying to putt out on the greens surrounded by clouds of multi-coloured dragonflies. Most of all I remember the people we met, the other competitors and their partners, the caddies and other staff and most of all, my favourite waitress in the Cinnabar, Helen (Lily)Zhang.

I'm sorry that more of us couldn't attend this event but I hope my descriptions have stirred your enthusiasm to travel to the next UWGC in Prague. Hope to see you all there.

Your faithful reporter

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