

BY BENNY TEO

# WAGC 2018

THE ELS CLUB IN DESARU LOOKS TO WELCOME THE QUALIFIER TO THE WORLD'S FOREMOST AMATEUR TOURNAMENT COME OCTOBER

The Els Club at Desaru, the jewel of golf courses in the nearby Malaysian state of Johor, augurs a new beginning for the once-desolate stretch of beaches.



The Valley Course clubhouse will host SPH-WAGC Singapore qualifiers.



(Above) The Coast Course lets golfers enjoy seaside vistas.

(Left) Vijay Singh made the Valley Course a truly difficult challenge.

Come October 5 and 6, there will be a hive of activity emanating from their two club houses, welcoming a Singapore-based group here for the prestigious SPH Golf-World Amateur Golfer's Championship (WAGC) national qualifier to be held at its Ocean and Valley courses.

Open to all Singaporeans and residents based in the island-republic, this will be the first time that the WAGC qualifier is being hosted overseas.

However, it is only a 30-minute ferry ride away to the championship courses of Ernie Els and Vijay Singh at The Els Club Desaru Coast.

Participants who sign up for the two-day event can expect return ferry, hotel stay, meals, and a qualifying 18-hole round at the Els Club's Valley Course.

Those who make the 30 per cent cut-line will return to the Valley Course the next day, while the rest continue playing at the Ocean Course. Additionally, a voucher will be issued to those who made the cut to return and play another round.

The package will be priced at \$480 for a twin-sharing room

and \$500 for single occupancy and golfers will also get Under Armour performance wear as part of the brand's inclusion as Main Sponsor and Official Apparel of this highly competitive amateur event.

"We have organised the WAGC Singapore qualifiers for four years now and have produced champions. This fifth year represents the first time we are hosting the event outside of Singapore and we can't ask for a better host than The Els Club at Desaru Coast, one of the best golf courses in the region," said Jacqueline Wu, deputy managing director of SPH Pacom Pte Ltd, who is the organiser of the tournament. Ms Wu is also the ladies captain of the SPH Golf Club.

The competition format will consist of five handicap divisions competing for one spot each to represent the nation in the World Finals barely a month later, where they will compete for individual as well as team titles.

To get a sense of what participants can look forward to, the top 30 per cent will play off for these five spots at the Valley Course, which will provide a stern test for

the golfers.

The Els Club will also play host to two of the four competitive rounds at the World Finals and with the return voucher, the five winners can certainly make full use of what is, in reality, a home course advantage.

The 18-hole track is built, as its name suggests, along slopes of a valley, and is tough by any standard. Measuring 7,181 yards from the back, Vijay Singh designed this course to start intimidatingly.

A tight par-four, first hole sees water on the left and steeply sloped rough on the right. A right to left fairway routing requires a draw off the tee, but just enough not to reach the water hazard.

The fifth hole is a par-five with 19 bunkers, the most on this course that is filled with 178 of them. Compounded with up-turned greens on most hole locations, the approach shot is key to a successful round here.

The next nine holes features beautiful landscaping with burns flowing through man-made rocky ridges, particularly on the 10th and 11th holes. The latter, which is the course's signature

hole, is a 380-yard downhill par-four that overlooks the Sand and Sandals hotel.

Championship courses aside, there is also a par-three Academy course that is adjacent of the Els Performance Academy managed by PGA-certified head professional PJ Van Merch.

There are also 300-plus yard grass driving ranges at both courses for participants of the WAGC to warm up before their golf.

The format of the World Finals includes the same five handicap divisions and will be played over 72 holes, stroke play, with handicap adjustments after each round.

The Championship Team Competition combines the best four scores (out of a possible five) per day from the national team.

In 2016, Team Singapore returned as champions for the first time by a massive 27 shots after finishing second the two years prior.

Last year, Team Singapore's Eric Tan Kim Vey came in first in his division (handicap 5.5-10.4) with more than 40 teams participating, while the team came in fourth position overall.