

SENTOSA ON TOP AGAIN

BY TAN JU KUANG

In the face of a changing golf landscape, one thing remains a constant – the Serapong Course at Sentosa Golf Club has an iron grip on number one. Golf Digest held its biennial

course rankings for Singapore courses this year, and the home of the national open continues to entrench itself on the perch among the 17 courses here. It is a position that the course has held since 2013, and it doesn't look like it's relinquishing it any time soon.

Golf Digest's course ranking process continues to be a rigorous one, and the criteria currently includes Shot Options, Challenge, Layout Variety, Distinctiveness, Aesthetics, Conditioning, Character and Fun (explanation of these criteria is provided in the sidebar). A panel of experienced independent golfers evaluates each golf course, providing rating scores that are used to derive the year's rankings.

While there is little denying that Serapong is Singapore's top course at the moment, this accolade comes with a small caveat. Three golf courses – Garden at Tanah Merah Country Club, the course at Seletar Country Club, and the New Course at Singapore Island Country Club – were closed for comprehensive reconstruction this year and were not rated.

This is of some significance as these three courses have perennially been ranked in the top five in the country, with the Garden Course holding the number one spot as recently as 2011.

Of course, this hardly takes anything away from Serapong. Originally designed by Ronald Fream, and later renovated by Bates Design (with current General Manager Andy Johnston on the project), the challenging layout with holes offering sea views of

GOLF DIGEST'S BIENNIAL COURSE RANKINGS OF SINGAPORE COURSES REVEAL NO SURPRISES. SENTOSA GOLF CLUB'S SERAPONG COURSE CONTINUES TO RULE THE ROOST



the downtown skyline remain arguably Singapore's truest test of golf.

It isn't incredibly long by today's standards, but the par-72 course (converted to par-71 for the national open) offers shot makers a palette by which to craft their shots.

Conditions at Serapong, as well as its sister course – the No.2-ranked Tanjong – are usually pristine, with greens typically running higher than nine on any given day.

Sentosa does not pinch pennies when it comes to adopting technology and the best equipment to maintain the two courses. And Johnston's expertise and experience in agronomy certainly goes a long way in helping the club maintain its reputation.

But change is afoot, and come the next Golf Digest rankings in 2021, Singapore will see three new golf courses rebuilt by clubs who are doubling down their efforts to displace Sentosa from its throne.

The course at Seletar Country Club (ranked No.3 in the 2017 Golf Digest Rankings for Singapore courses) will see a complete rebuild by Kevin Ramsey and David Dale of GolfPlan, with an expected opening date in late 2019 or early 2020.

"The six holes along the (Seletar) reservoir have been completely redesigned, which necessitated the rerouting and redesign of five additional holes," Ramsey told Golf Course, a golf trade publication.

"Making everything fit together – in an aesthetic, golfing, and safety sense – required a great deal of ingenuity on our part. We still have fully 64 hectares at our disposal, but this will be a brand new 18 and a vastly improved one when we're finished.

Singapore Island Country Club, currently renegotiating its land lease with the Singapore land authorities, has also upped its ante. In May

this year, it closed the Peter Thomson re-designed New Course, as well as its nine-hole Millennium executive layout, to make way for a comprehensive reconstruction that will result in 27 brand new holes by Graham Marsh Golf Design.

"This is the first major renovation in more than 17 years and we are very excited to be elevating the golf experience for our members," says out-going SICC Club Captain Ivan Chua.

Tanah Merah Country Club has always ranked as one of the most premier of private establishments in the country, and the Garden Course stood as the best not too long ago. But of late, land demands by the government for expansion works at Changi International Airport have resulted in ad hoc renovations.

Now that the club's rebuilt Tampines Course is opened for play, Tanah Merah has averted its attention to reviving Garden to past glory. The famed Robert Trent Jones Jr was hired to design the new par-71 layout, and the result promises to be a paradigm shift to how holes are put together here.

Apart from building 17 brand new holes, the new Garden will feature a routing that enables three-, six- or nine-hole loops. Thankfully, the course will retain much of its parkland nature, with several hundred new trees planted to give each hole a distinct framework. Garden is earmarked to open in the first half of 2020.

Even though the number of golf courses in this country has dropped since the last rankings two years ago, there is every expectation that the quality will increase when Golf Digest conducts its next one in 2021.

For the time being, though, Serapong remains the best golf course in Singapore.

2019 GOLF DIGEST COURSE RANKINGS

SINGAPORE

CONSOLIDATED SCORES (AVERAGES)

10 - Absolutely Perfect	4.0 - 5.9 - Acceptable to Good
8.0 - 9.9 Outstanding	2.0 - 3.9 - Poor to Tolerable
6.0 - 7.9 - Very Good to Excellent	1.0 - 1.9 - Unacceptable

Club	Course	Par	# of Holes	Shot Options	Challenge	Layout Variety	Distinctiveness	Aesthetics	Conditioning	Character	Fun	Total (Max 80)	Adj. Total (100%)
1	Sentosa GC Serapong	72	18	7.66	7.75	7.70	7.44	7.36	8.14	7.70	7.31	61.05	76.32
2	Sentosa GC New Tanjong	72	18	6.87	6.95	6.80	6.62	7.30	8.13	7.18	7.29	57.13	71.41
3	Laguna National Classic	72	18	7.18	7.38	6.96	7.44	6.53	7.78	7.04	6.74	57.05	71.32
4	Tanah Merah Tampines	72	18	6.90	7.09	6.62	6.59	6.66	7.26	6.60	6.48	54.21	67.77
5	Laguna National Masters	72	18	6.56	6.49	6.61	6.45	6.51	7.16	6.52	6.75	53.05	66.32
6	SICC Island	72	18	6.71	6.39	6.34	6.54	6.29	6.01	6.52	6.49	51.29	64.11
7	Sembawang CC	72	18	6.20	6.34	6.37	6.28	6.10	6.29	6.40	6.35	50.34	62.92
8	SICC Bukit	71	18	6.30	6.33	6.22	6.18	6.17	5.43	6.49	6.06	49.19	61.49
9	Warren GC	71	18	6.03	6.28	5.99	5.95	5.80	6.28	6.13	6.30	48.77	60.97
10	NSRCC Changi	72	18	5.80	5.75	6.00	5.79	5.95	6.12	5.72	5.93	47.06	58.82
11	Orchid CC Vanda/Aranda	72	18	6.00	5.63	5.63	5.53	6.08	5.88	5.78	6.25	46.75	58.44
12	Orchid CC Aranda/Dendro	73	18	5.98	5.80	5.78	5.70	6.24	5.68	5.68	6.08	46.72	58.40
13	Keppel Club	72	18	5.96	6.18	5.98	6.04	5.78	5.05	5.74	5.41	46.13	57.66
14	Marina Bay	72	18	5.06	5.30	5.41	5.31	5.69	5.74	5.57	5.96	44.06	55.07
15	Orchid CC Vanda/Dendro	73	18	5.61	5.52	5.50	5.34	5.53	5.42	5.35	5.77	44.03	55.04
16	NSRCC Kranji Sanctuary	72	18	5.55	5.57	5.54	5.36	5.46	5.08	5.59	5.64	43.80	54.75
17	SICC Sime	72	18	5.53	5.42	5.44	5.43	5.36	4.63	5.48	5.33	42.60	53.25

HOW OUR PANEL RANKS THE COURSES

Golf Digest panellists rate courses based on eight categories

SHOT OPTIONS: How well does the course present a variety of options involving risks and rewards and require a wide range of shots?

CHALLENGE: How challenging, while still being fair, is the course for a typical scratch golfer playing from the tees designated as back tees for everyday play (not from seldom-used championship tees)?

LAYOUT VARIETY: How varied is the physical layout of the course in terms of differing lengths (long, medium and short par 3s, 4s and 5s), configurations (straight holes, doglegs left and right), hazard placements, green shapes and green contours?

DISTINCTIVENESS: How individual is each hole when compared to all others on this course?

AESTHETICS: How well do the scenic values of the course (including landscaping, vegetation, water features and backdrops) add to the pleasure of a round?

CONDITIONING: How firm, fast and rolling were the fairways? How firm yet receptive were the greens? How true were the rolls of putts?

CHARACTER: How well does the atmosphere of the course convey the feeling that the game of golf is the most important purpose at this location?

FUN: How enjoyable for all levels of golfers would this course be to play on a regular basis?