

LOVIN' GREEN

A 150-Acre 9-Hole Course On The Outskirts Of Chennai Is The Latest Attraction For Golfers — Both Indians And Expats Kamini Mathai | TNN

From executives wanting crash courses on the game to families trying to bond, an expanding range of people, young and old, are heading out to tee.

When the IVRCL group threw open Edgewater, its nine-hole 150-acre golf course in Sriperumbudur recently, the response was overwhelming to say the least. More than 110 golfers putted in every single weekday, though the course is more than 30km outside the city.

"Most of them are Korean and Japanese expats working in the city," says Pradyumna Prakash, a ranked amateur golfer and executive at the golf project. Despite the day charges of 1,500, golfers from around the city – both Indians and expats – are coming in to play. He adds that the course will extend to 18 holes in a few months.

Sukhee Lee, a Korean translator, says most of the Koreans who live in the city play golf for many reasons. "They like the sunny weather, and also find it cheaper to play here than back home. Also, they consider golf one of the best ways to socialise with other members of the community. Almost 80 per cent of the Korean community has taken to the game," she says.

Meanwhile, the number of golf memberships has risen substantially at the Madras Gymkhana Club (MGC) Golf Annexe, says A Chandrasekharan, member in charge of the greens. "Even the demographics of players is changing. We can see people coming in from all walks of life," he adds.

With three courses in the heart of the city – the MGC, Tamil Nadu Golf Federation Cosmopolitan Club, and the army-maintained golf club at Island Grounds – the new 18-hole course coming up on the outskirts, as well as several putting ranges and practice drives, Chennai seems to be teeing off like never before.

"A number of families come in to learn the game," says MGC golf coach D Sadanathan, who has been playing since he was six years old. "Parents send their children for classes. Then they realise they can play the game too and join the class. I can see them having a nice time together while learning to play as a family."

Golf instructors say more and more professionals in the city are also beginning to take to the game. "Their reasons vary – some see it as a tool to network, while others see it as a sport they can play through their lives," says avid golfer and instructor Jayanan Satagopal. Of late, a number of young and mid-level professionals – most of them NRIs from Chennai – want crash courses so they can network with their clients abroad. "They want to know enough to not look stumped when a client invites them for a round of golf. So I teach them the basics when they are on holiday in India," says Satagopal.

For 45-year-old Thallam Sreekumar, who works with a bank, his interest in golf began because he realised it was a good way to network. After nine years on the greens, he has begun to love it. "It is a game that you can play to the grave," says Sreekumar. "I tried my hand at the game because I thought

it was a good way to break the ice with clients. When you invite them for a game, you get to spend more than four hours with them alone," he says. "Affordability was hindering the growth of the sport, but now you can get golf kits for 20,000, the same price as that of a good cricket kit. The only downside is accessibility – most courses are run by clubs and membership is difficult to get. But one can just hope that more courses open on the outskirts," he says.

PUTTING ABOUT

Started in 1949, the Addicts Golfing Society of Southern India is still going strong, with 1,800 members from the four southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. "The golfers were called addicts because the club was headquartered in Chennai, where prohibition was enforced. The golfers would then head off to Karnataka where there was no prohibition law to enjoy a round of golf and a round of drinks after," says Ramesh Mouli, a member of the society. "Now of course, Chennai is not a dry state, and members play a golf tournament at one of the four southern states every month in rotation," he adds. The Addicts play for ten months of the calendar year, with no games played in May and July on account of the weather. "We play in nine centres around India and we have tournament overseas every year," adds Mouli.



COURSE CONTROL

With Chennai's water situation known to be grave, maintenance of a golf course is a tough proposition, admit course managers, but they add that they believe the right know-how, in terms of landscaping, sustainability and technology, can help. From sewage treatment plants (STPs) on the premises to man-made lakes, greens managers are swinging in every direction to maintain their grounds.

At real estate company IVRCL's residential township Aavisa in Sriperumbudur, for instance, the developers have created seven lakes within the 150-acre greens. "The lakes are all inter-connected underground and we have a central storm drainage system too," says Gaurav Syal, project manager. "During the rains, water is diverted to the lakes. We will also have an STP on the premises," says Syal, adding that the course requires one and a half-million litres of water a day for maintenance. While

creating man-made reservoirs is one way to go, STPs — which can cost up to several crore rupees — seem to be the more common practice. The Madras Gymkhana Club Golf Annexe and the TNGF Cosmopolitan golf courses use STPs, says Jayanan Satagopal, golfer and instructor. “The average production of treated water from the plant at Cosmopolitan is around a million litres a day,” he says. According to A Chandrasekharan, committee member in charge of the greens at MGC Golf Annexe, “Water usage and maintenance costs can be reduced. At the Gymkhana courses, local grasses are used, which makes them easier to maintain.” He adds that there are plans in place to bring in equipment, which can sense moisture levels in the greens and water just the areas that require it.

But advocate T K Ramkumar, also a member of ecoorganisation Exnora, says an STP alone is not the answer to maintaining a course. “Courses require reverse osmosis plants because we cannot be sure to what extent the water is being treated. Also, watering the grounds with treated water can impact the groundwater,” says Ramkumar. He adds another eco-concern is the monoculture on the grounds. “You have acres of a single type of grass. This impacts diversity and is not ecofriendly,” he says. TNN

