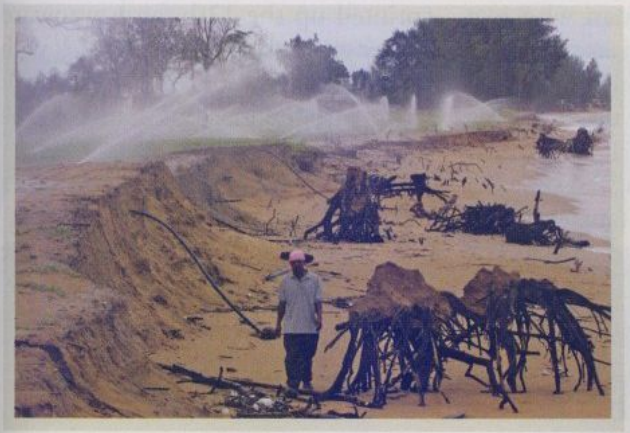
WAVE OF DESTRUCTION

When the Indian Ocean tsunami ravaged Tublamu in Thailand, it stole lives but not the spirit of the survivors, who work 12-hour days to rebuild the course before the one-year anniversary of the disaster.

Story by Edward Boyda and Micah Woods
Photographs by Palani Mohan

THE DEADLIEST DAY IN SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY broke innocently at Tublamu Navy Golf Course, with a tropical sun burning through the clouds at the course an hour's drive north of the resort island of Phuket, Thailand.



Worker Komphol Gladesathabun walks beside the 17th hole. The skeletal roots of casaurina trees are reminders of the tsunami that killed two caddies and several golfers at Tublamu.

The grounds crew mowed and set pins into the wiry Manila-grass greens of this former mangrove swamp that stretches a mile along the beach and boasts four of Thailand's five seaside holes. By 10 a.m., greens superintendent Watcharapong Teangin was serving his team pineapple slices in the maintenance building behind the clubhouse.

Sixty golfers and their caddies were already on the course, having begun their rounds on a hole that doglegged right around a grove of trees toward the placid ➤

Workers build a rain shield for the parking lot.

Life revolves around the course for those who work here.

GETTY IMAGES

sea. From there the course turned inland, playing around and over palm-shaded lagoons before returning to the sea for three dramatic finishing holes.

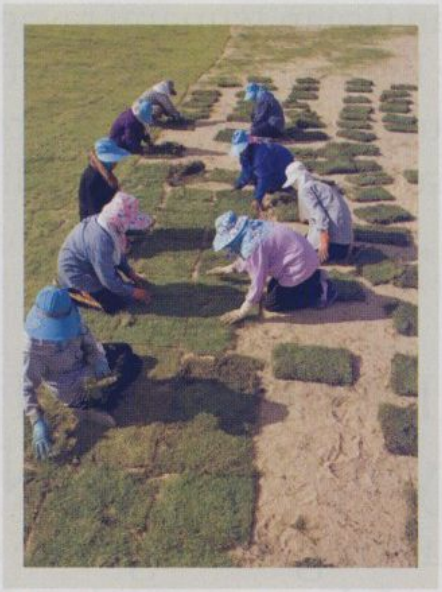
On Dec. 26, 2004, as players made their way around the course, a tidal wave was speeding toward them across the open ocean, borne of an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra. In the shallower waters of Tublamu Bay, the wave slowed and heaved up. Then, with the energy of a small nuclear bomb, it crashed upon the shore.

Teangin raced on his motorbike toward the houses behind the course. "Get out! Get out!" he yelled. The water was already up to his knees. His wife grabbed the bike and sped off to higher ground. But Teangin knew his 16-year-old son, Manit, was caddying on the front nine, somewhere between Teangin and the sea.

Jumping into his truck, Teangin hit the gas in reverse, and then he saw it. The main wall of the tsunami, a turbulent bore riding on the tide, plowed into him.

"It's not like a wave. It's black. It looked like dirt. Just dirt, trees, everything. It looked more solid than water," he said.

The wave spun and buried the truck.



Caddies lay sod in two-foot squares.

Teangin, a powerful man who is a sub-lieutenant in the Thai navy, climbed through the window into the sludge, swimming for the surface and slamming into the logs above him. He went down and again tried to surface, but he failed to catch a breath. The tangle of logs trapped him under the water and blocked out the light.

His strength failed. "I needed help," Teangin recalls. "I prayed." He prayed to Prince Chumphon, the son of King Rama V and the founder of the Thai navy, a spirit revered by Thai sailors.

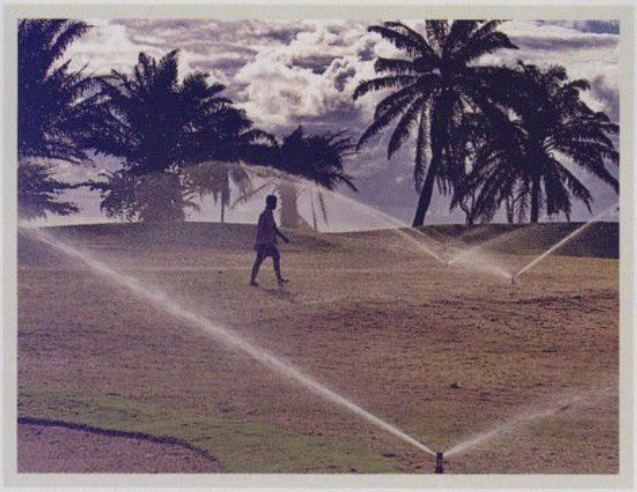
Looking up, he saw a spot of light through the debris above him, and he burst through it. He grabbed a swing set, then the trunk of a tree, trying to fend off the logs and cars and metal rushing toward him. Then the tide receded. About 300 yards behind his house, with a gaping wound in his side, Teangin sat on solid ground.

The players on the course had bolted at the first sight of the tsunami, but caddie Gaysorn Jaikwao kept dragging her bag as she fled from the wave. She heard the water churning and the limbs popping off trees behind her. Jaikwao sprinted up the 12th fairway toward higher ground, but a marsh thick with trees and vines blocked her escape. If swept into the mesh of branches, she would drown.

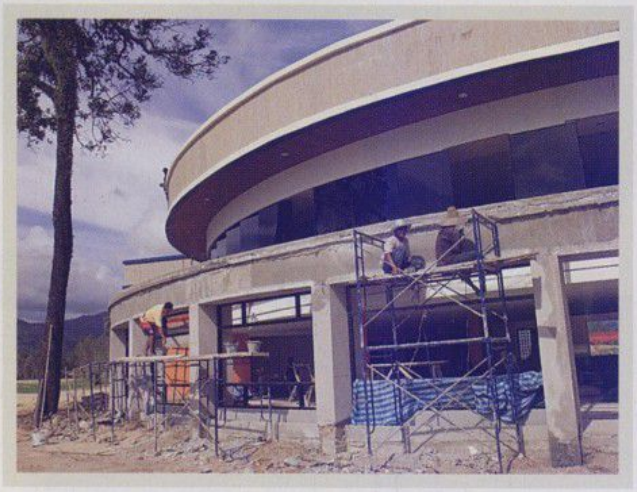
"Don't run," she cried to the caddies next to her. "Just climb the tree!"

A 30-foot forest mangrove was the caddies' last hope of escaping the wave. ▶

"If that tree had cracked or snapped or broken, that was it."



The sea took the course from man. Now man returns the favor.



GETTY IMAGES

The new clubhouse will give players sweeping views.

Scrambling between its twin trunks, they hoisted themselves up until they could grab the branches. Soon four caddies filled the crown of the tree.

"If that tree had cracked or snapped or broken, that was it," said Jaikwao.

By all reason, that tree—not exactly a majestic oak—should have cracked under the caddies' weight and the tsunami's force. But it stood firm above the wave.

Several golfers died, and just fragments of their stories remain: a golf bag found near the 16th hole, a ball-marker implanted in the first green, all but a corner of which was torn up and washed away.

Two caddies died. One was Teangin's son, Manit. A boy who wanted to follow his father into the navy, Manit excelled in math, loved golf and caddied on the weekends. Although neighbors reported seeing Manit ride off in a pickup truck during the tsunami, Teangin found his son's body in a temple where victims' bodies had been laid, after a tortured day of searching.

Now, almost a year after the tragedy, Teangin tells the story of that terrible day. The caddie Jaikwao and two other survivors sit beside him, along with the architect and project manager rebuilding

Greens superintendent Watcharapong Teangin holds a picture of his 16-year-old son, Manit, who died in the Dec. 26, 2004, tsunami.

the course. The walls are pasted with detailed maps, and a half-eaten pile of rambutans (a red fruit with spines protruding from it) sits on a desk.

Teangin laughs easily, his face creased with the lines of a jovial man, while his commanding presence and full frame fill up the room. His friends call him *Ouan*, which means "fat." That makes him laugh, too, although a more fitting description would be "ox-like."

The mood in the room shifts from upbeat to somber as Teangin recalls what he heard from a caddie working with his son that day. When the wave came, Manit, instead of fleeing, turned back toward the course to look for his father.

Asked if he feels a sense of pride that his son was selfless in his final minutes, Teangin turns away. His body heaves with stifled sobs. When he turns back, tears are flowing down his cheeks.

The Thai people are fond of the expression *mai ben rai*, which translates to "it's nothing." It can be said casually, like when you bump your head. At other times it means accepting the vicissitudes of life. This acceptance is deeply felt in Thai culture and linked to the Thai people's strong Buddhist faith. The phrase might better be rendered "that's life," because life involves birth, growth and death.

From out of their great loss, the survivors are rebuilding. Teangin lost his home, his savings and his son. At times he expresses bitterness, but more often a deep acceptance. He and his wife and daughter have a new home on the navy base behind the second hole, and he rides about on his motorbike, overseeing the reconstruction of his beloved course.

"I am excited and proud, because I've been a part of it all along,"

"I am excited and proud, because I've been a part of it all along," Teangin says. He worked heavy equipment on the construction crew 10 years ago, when the course was first built, and has been its primary caretaker ever since.

Along with many of the caddies, Jaikwao has joined the construction crew to make a living until she can return to caddying. "Without the course, it doesn't feel right," she says, explaining how her life revolved around her job. Every day she rides her scooter the 25 miles from her home to Tublamu. Like Teangin, Jaikwao has been working at the course since it opened, and her sister and most of her friends are here too.

Each day, trucks loaded with sod arrive from Bangkok, and the caddie crew lays out the fairways two square feet at a time in 12-hour shifts.

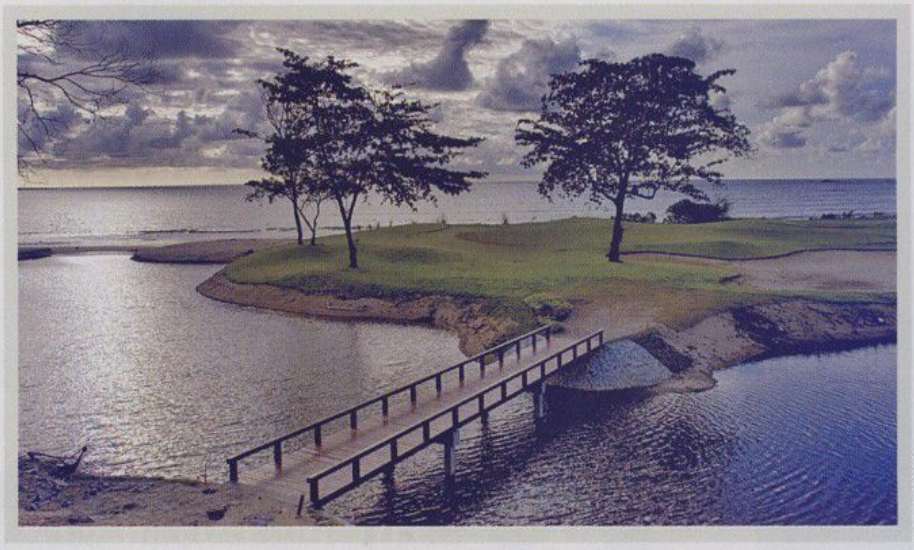
A young Thai course architect, Pirapon Namatra, is redesigning the course, changing the holes to take full advantage of the sea and adding bunkers and contours to the greens to give the course a design worthy of its setting.

"When I first went there in January, it was a mess," he says. "There were carts in the pond, trees uprooted, half a fairway, half a green. But the beauty was always there."

The most dramatic hole on the new course is the par-4 17th, which runs 400 yards along the water. Without any rough separating it from the beach, the fairway seems to reach out for the sea. Namatra has softened the deep furrows carved by the tsunami, but they remain as chiseled sand bunkers on the right side of the hole, a reminder of what happened here. The skeletal roots of felled casuarina trees line the beach like sentinels.

Namatra expresses his confidence that his team's hard work will "signify the strength of the region and of the Thai people."

The course will reopen sometime in late November, before the one-year anniversary of the tsunami.



GETTY IMAGES

The new 18th green is a grand finale for a grand endeavor.

"What I really like about it is that it's a public golf course, and anybody can get on it for next to nothing and experience its beauty," Namatra says, adding with a mischievous laugh, "as long as they bring enough golf balls." ■