

MISTY FAIRWAYS

GOLF IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS

A photograph of a golfer standing on a green golf course. The golfer is wearing a white cap, a white shirt, and dark pants, and is holding a golf bag. The background features a misty, hazy landscape with rolling hills and trees. A yellow flag is visible on the left side of the frame. The overall atmosphere is serene and misty.

HARI ACHANTA

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Contents

Foreword	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Author's Note	xv
1. The Company of 51	1
2. Hill and Dale	17
3. Browns and Downs	33
4. Small is Beautiful	43
5. Parkland and Hill	55
6. In the Meadow	71
7. Three Men in a Course	83

8. In the High Ranges	97
9. Hide and Seek in the Mist	111
10. Nirvana in the Hills	131
11. The Golf Course and the Brook	149
12. The Lost Courses	167
13. Twister and Fort Knox	179
14. Roads Less Travelled	189
Off the Beaten Track – A Travel Guide	202
Save the Western Ghats	204
Glossary	206





1



The Company of 51

CHIKMAGALUR GOLF CLUB



The 4th hole

The Company of 51

Chikmagalur is known as the home of Indian coffee and is situated in the Bababudangiri Hills of the Western Ghats in Karnataka. As is well-known locally, the hills derive their name from Baba Budan, an Arab mystic who came to this region a couple of hundred years ago and brought with him a few coffee seeds. It is widely believed that he introduced coffee to India and thus, the coffee industry sprang up around here.



The Founder-President AB Sudarshan

When the coffee planters in the Chikmagalur area caught the golf bug, the only option they had of playing the great game was to go to the metropolis of Bangalore, 250 km away. Unlike other plantation areas like Ooty and Munnar, the British planters for some reason did not see it fit to build a golf course in this area. There was the nearby Kadur Club, the erstwhile English Club, for their social and other sporting activities but for golf there was no proximate option. The golfing planters who were addicted to the game, kept finding reasons to get away to Bangalore to play golf, in the process neglecting their coffee estates.

And so it was in 1995, AB Sudarshan, a seventh generation coffee planter got the “crazy” (in his own words) idea to try and build a golf course in Chikmagalur. As a result of Sudarshan’s persistent efforts, a band of 51 people who subscribed to the idea, procured 56 acres of tenanted land in an area



View of the clubhouse from the 18th green

called Karadikaval (place of the bears in Kannada) on which potatoes were being cultivated. It took Sudarshan and his dedicated fraternity a good five more years to vacate the tenants and obtain clear possession.

Around this time, the Bangalore Golf Club (BGC) had engaged the Australian, Phil Ryan of Pacific Coast Design, to redesign their course. Using his contacts in BGC, Sudarshan (he was a member) asked Ryan to come over and take a look at their piece of land. There being no road access, Ryan was brought here cross-country in a 4-wheel drive jeep. Impressed with the dedication and enthusiasm of the Company of 51, Ryan provided his design services at a highly concessional rate. And from here on, plans rolled forward like the proverbial juggernaut.

A 9-hole golf course was opened in 2002. The superb clubhouse was completed in 2004 and residential facilities a couple of years later. Sudarshan also went the whole hog by acquiring a further 25 acres in 2011, to expand the course to eighteen holes; an 18-hole course at the end of the day is the real deal. Ryan was called in again (this time he charged full fees!) and by 2015, Chikmagalur Golf Club (CGC) had a full-fledged golf facility on 81 acres of land. Additional amenities such as a health club with swimming pool, were soon added and now without doubt, it is a top-quality facility in every which way, comparable to the best in the land.



The 5th fairway and green



The stone bridge to get to the 18th green





The 7th green bordered by the pretty Cassia Spectabilis flowers

People like Sudarshan deserve the highest accolades for this achievement. To build a golf course in India from scratch is a stupendous feat – overcoming obstacles of land consolidation, repurposing, government intervention, funds scarcity, etc., is no easy task. Today, the band of 51 and their admirable leader bask in well-deserved glory.

The golf course itself is surrounded by a few hills giving an amphitheatre ambience. A shortish course, the CGC is a delight to play on and most golfers will have a nice day out with some decent scoring. But paradoxically many of the par-3s are devilishly long. The Lord giveth in one hand and taketh from the other! And herein lies the quintessential nature of this golf course.



The 5th green



The 8th fairway



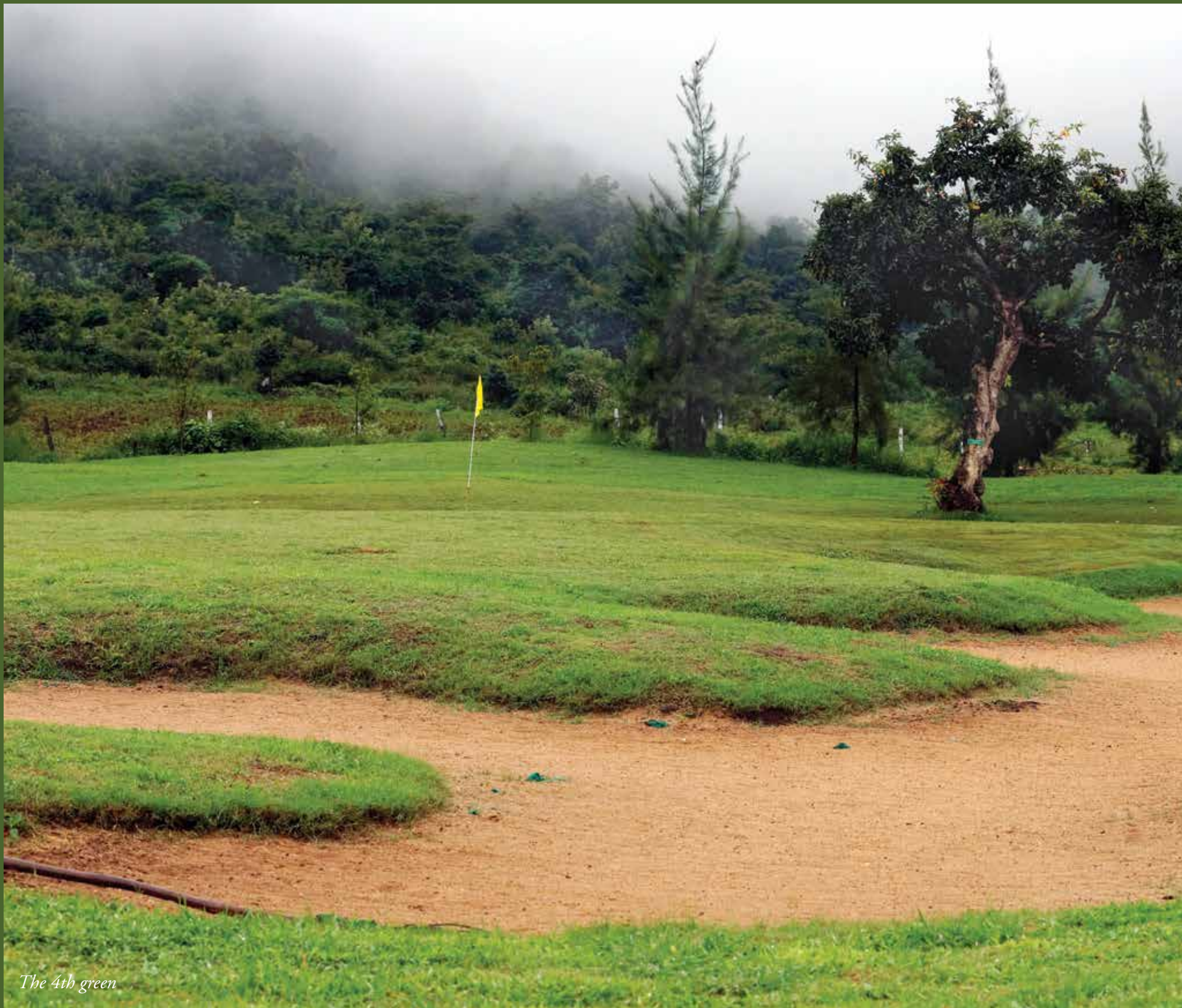
The par-3 12th hole, with trees guarding the green

Pars are generally easier on the par-4s, but very difficult to come by on the par-3s. Several of the 51 originals consider the 200-yard-long, par-3 second hole the signature hole of the layout with a carry over a chasm, OB on the left and a green, well-guarded by bunkers. They may well be right, but to me the longer par-3 fourth (215 yards uphill) seemed to be a prettier hole with more character. The entire right side of the green is protected by bunkers. With a backdrop of verdant hills and framed on either side by coniferous trees, it makes a very pretty picture indeed. And not to forget the golfing challenge – my caddie suggested a 3-wood, to hit off the tee and since I don't carry one, I had to use my driver which went long. Any par-3 which requires a big club from the tee is special!

The par-4 eighth is another hole with a lot of character. A short dogleg left, there is the danger of OB all along the left side. If you place your tee shot well on the narrow fairway, there is a downhill approach to a large green. The finishing par-4 eighteenth presents its own unique challenge. A deep ravine, sometimes filled with water (during the monsoons), intervenes between the fairway and the green and presents a tricky problem to the homecoming golfer intent on recovering his losing bets – even a slight mishit on the approach will send his ball careening into the ravine.



The 12th hole



The 4th green



View from the 6th tee





A view of the 3rd green

Overall, as already mentioned, golfers will enjoy this course if one goes by the yardstick of how they would perform relative to their handicaps and how many balls they lose in a round. On both counts, most will do fair, although it's not all a smooth sail. In order to play well, they will still have to overcome the challenges of the long par-3s and the tricky greens.

Nineteenth hole facilities are superb here. The founder President Sudarshan, was very clear about that at the planning stage itself. He feels (rightly so) that it is imperative to enjoy the jokes, the yarns and the jibes about the missed two-footer or the duff at a crucial moment, in congenial surroundings. The bar, sit-outs and dining areas are very tastefully and aesthetically done. Adding the comfortable, well-appointed residential accommodation to the mix, makes this place an absolutely must visit golfing destination. And the temperate climate here should be the deal clincher.

A point to be noted is that Sudarshan and his comrades ensured that many of the original tenants on the lands on which the golf course is built were provided employment, either on the course or in the club – an example of responsible social integration that does a lot to dispel the notion that golf is a game which displaces the less-advantaged, thus making it a win-win situation for all concerned. I am sure that some of these people work in the kitchen as you get superb local cuisine like *akki roti*, *avarakkai saru*, etc., on the menu!

AC Suresh Chandra, one of the founding members was responsible for planting nearly 200 species of trees including flowering trees, fruit trees, jungle varieties, etc., making the course botanically vibrant. However, it is a matter of concern to note that Chikmagalur district faces environmental degradation of its hills and forests. Encroachment of forests, poaching, setting up of tourist resorts in ecologically sensitive areas, irresponsible mining, etc., are some of the contributory factors. As golfers we need to do whatever we can to protect the hills while we enjoy playing golf in beautiful settings.

The last word must be about the admirable Company of 51. Overcoming so many obstacles, they have managed to create a wonderful haven of golf with an attractive course and an excellent clubhouse in a picturesque place with salubrious climate. Can we ask for more? ■



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