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BY THOMAS DUNNE

**WE-KO-PA
GOLF CLUB**
The Coore
& Crenshaw-
designed
Cholla course,
near Scottsdale



In the past 15 years, Phoenix-Scottsdale has emerged as the most multidimensional winter golf destination in the United States. The Valley of the Sun maintained its general air of approachability even as its population swelled and construction boomed. The diversification of lodging has increased too. On one hand, there are traditional resorts like the **Fairmont Scottsdale Princess** (rooms from \$180; 7575 E. Princess Dr.; 480-585-4848),

which boasts a great location directly adjacent to the TPC Scottsdale course and offers a full slate of new rooms and private casitas. On the other, at the **Hotel Valley Ho** (rooms from \$120; 6850 E. Main St.; 480-376-2600) in Old Town Scottsdale, a superb revival of midcentury modern design conspires with a stylish pool scene to create a fast-paced atmosphere. Downtown Phoenix is getting into the action, as new hotels like the **Camby** (rooms from \$190;



DESERT FOREST
The private club's
recently renovated
1962 Red
Lawrence course

2401 E. Camelback Rd.; 602-468-0700) lend a boutique spin to the business traveler's orbit. In short, golf works here at any speed—for couples, families, buddy trips, singles, you name it.

Phoenix-Scottsdale has stockpiled golf in quantity since the 1960s, and although the past decade has been light on new construction (keeping with the national trend), a number of renovation projects have clarified or redefined certain courses' places in the local pecking order. Keep an eye on **Verde River Golf & Social Club** (29005 N. Verde River Way, Rio Verde; 480-471-3232) as it transitions from public facility to private club. Former British Open champion and Scottsdale resident Tom Lehman has shown promise in his early outings as a golf architect, and Verde River's isolated property, set at the northeastern terminus of the valley against the backdrop of the Four Peaks and Tonto National Forest, has potential. However, he'll have his work cut out for him in tightening up the routing and reconfiguring the course to improve its sight lines.

As for long-established private clubs, **Desert Forest Golf Club** (private; 37207 N. Mule Train Rd., Carefree; 480-488-4589) recently completed a controversial renovation to its tough-as-nails 1962 Red Lawrence course, in which former Coore & Crenshaw associate David Zinkand reshaped greens complexes and reconfigured

Golf in Phoenix-Scottsdale WORKS AT ANY SPEED— for couples, families, buddy trips, singles, you name it.

(and in a few cases removed) bunkers. In retrospect, any edits to this course, considered to be the first true desert golf design, were bound to have a few detractors, but there's much to be said for how Zinkand drew out the holes' character. In any event, Desert Forest remains one of the purest golf experiences in the country, an intimate and low-key club with an avid culture of walking. It's also a comprehensive X-ray of one's game, especially off the tee.

One course that hasn't changed—in part because it's only ten years old—is the Saguaro at **We-Ko-Pa Golf Club** (18200 East Toh Vee Circle, Fort McDowell; 480-836-9000), a Coore & Crenshaw design on lands of the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation. Only half an hour northeast of Scottsdale, Saguaro and its sister course, Scott Miller's Cholla, are among the area's top public options. They can be done as a 36-hole day.

Given the Southwest's water restrictions, desert golf has design limitations. In order to reduce maintained turf, many courses either feature significant forced carries, narrow fairways, or both. Saguaro's 62 acres of irrigated turf are typical of the region, yet Coore & Crenshaw created a fun, playable design. Wide fairways taper to greens surrounded by short grass that creates recovery options. One can easily make bogey without hitting a bad shot; rather, Saguaro extracts quarter- and half-shot penalties on those who get slightly out of position. Short par-4s abound—the 2nd tracks east along the desert floor; the 7th hugs the edge of a high shelf; the 10th is a bombs-away, Cape-style tee shot; and the 16th plays dead uphill to a tiny target. Each hole has tempting prospects, but the golfer is likely to come off the 18th green convinced that, having banked valuable bits of knowledge, his or her next round at Saguaro will be the one where it finally comes together. That's the mark of satisfying golf.

Thanks to its status as the PGA Tour's "party" stop, the Stadium Course at the **TPC Scottsdale** (17020 N. Hayden Rd.; 480-585-4334) is a front-runner on many Phoenix-area golf itineraries. While it's famous for the 16,000 fans bearing down on the pros on the 16th hole, there's a lot to recommend for those visiting on a typical weekend. The TPC, which will celebrate its

30th anniversary next year, ranks among the best works by Tom Weiskopf and his design partner, the late Jay Morrish. In 2014, Weiskopf returned to Scottsdale to oversee renovations, including shuffling bunkers around and building four new greens. This has freshened up the course. The new fourth hole is a particular area of improvement. Weiskopf raised the green and lip of its fronting bunker, obscuring the left side of the putting surface and adding intrigue to a par-3 in a less scenic course corner.

The back nine, though, is where the TPC offers its justification for being the most expen-

sive course in town. The 16th might actually be the least interesting hole on the side—without the spectator pressure, it's a fairly rote affair—but it's surrounded by entertaining stuff. The long 14th is a tough par from any tee, while the par-5 15th plays to an island green that's just big enough of a target to tempt gamblers into going for it in two. The 17th is a par-4 that's reachable with one's best drive. However, when it comes to this drumstick-shaped green, what TV can't quite communicate is just how nerve-racking any approach to a back hole location will be.

hot. "It was such a different presentation of desert golf that people clamored to see it," said Jim Urbina, one of Doak's former senior associates, who managed a team of 80 Apache in the course's construction.

A decade later, though, the course was on the verge of being reclaimed by the desert. The tribe's commitment to golf seemed to be faltering. For golf courses—especially remote ones—reports of poor conditioning can be a death sentence, and Apache Stronghold, with its crumbling bunkers and dirt fairways, appeared to be headed in that direction. In its half-ruined state, the course slowly acquired a Xanadu-like mythos among golf junkies.

Few would have mourned the decline of

style green set on a saddle ridge.

Apache Stronghold will not appeal to everyone. Although new superintendent David Russell has returned the course to a playable state, the conditioning is at the level of a low-end muni. (In fairness, its greens fee is priced accordingly.) Some cart paths are in bad shape, it's a fairly strenuous hike on foot, and the off-course amenities are basic at best. Those who arrive with an open mind and reasonable expectations, though, will be rewarded. One might see a solitary eagle hanging motionless in the thermals or, upon leaving the fairway, suddenly find oneself in the middle of an enormous cloud of yellow butterflies. A day in the foothills of Apache Stronghold unfolds like a dream, with the difference being that this experience will be remembered for a long time to come. ♦



TPC SCOTTSDALE
The Stadium Course, which hosts the Phoenix Open, was given a refresh in 2014.

It takes a certain type of golfer to leave behind the manicured fairways of the valley, but sometimes it's worth it to think of the game as a pretext for adventure. Two hours east of Scottsdale, climbing up to 3,200 feet in the