

We-Ko-Pa Offers Golf and More

By Doug Slice

Photos by Lonna Tucker



Cholla Hole 11

In the decades immediately following World War I, the Phoenix area was a little more than a pass-through town on the way to California. The summers were scorching and air conditioning was a luxury that would not be fully integrated in homes and businesses for another 20 years. The loop freeways synonymous with Phoenix and Scottsdale travel weren't even a glimmer in the eyes of taxpayers or governors. The television boom that captivated the nuclear family was three decades away.

So what did Phoenix residents do for fun before all the hustle and bustle? In short, listen to Roosevelt's fireside chats and play golf. Generations later, people from all over the world flock to the Valley of the Sun for luxury shopping, world-class sporting events, exquisite dining and – above all else – to play absolutely incredible golf. At the very top of the 200 courses in the Phoenix metro area is We-Ko-Pa Golf Club, boasting the No. 1 and No. 10 ranked courses in the entire state.

The Cholla course at We-Ko-Pa Golf Club burst on to the Scottsdale scene in December 2001 as an early Christmas gift wrapped in some of the most scenic Sonoran Desert on the planet. The Saguaro

course followed in 2006. Since then, both have racked up an impressive list of accolades.

Until recently, the We-Ko-Pa experience was more of a day trip – drive out, play golf, drive back. Now, with the emergence of the resort and other fun-filled amenities, that has changed. We-Ko-Pa has been transformed into a viable vacation destination – just far enough away from the city, but just close enough to the magnificent southwest.

It all began a couple years ago, when the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation took over operations of the existing resort off Highway 87 and rebranded it the We-Ko-Pa Resort & Conference Center. Today, the resort features all the vacation-type amenities one would expect, including 246 contemporary guest rooms and suites, Southwestern-inspired cuisine, luxurious spa and salon services, and a heated outdoor pool. And it's well-suited for groups of all shapes and sizes. In fact, they added new Golf Suites as a convenient and comfortable lodging option for stay-and-play vacations. Each of the four newly designed golf-themed suites accommodates four to five guests in two deluxe rooms connected by a living room with a pullout sofa and kitchen.



Saguaro Hole 5



Cholla Hole 3



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Saguaro Hole 8



short distance from Chicago Golf, with a display of old clubs and memorabilia from the start to the present day.

A committee has also put together a catalog of the exhibit and other items the museum has acquired, focusing on the key individuals who have come through Chicago Golf and Wheaton in general through the years. The catalog is for sale at Arrowhead.

Major Doings in French Lick

Women's golf has come a long way in 60 years. That's when the still-young LPGA came to French Lick, Ind., and Louise Suggs won the French Lick Open, and the \$1,247 winner's share of the \$7,000 purse. Last year, the ladies returned for the inaugural senior

major championship for women, the Senior LPGA Championship. Trish Johnson won it, and a place in golf history.

From October 15-17, Johnson will be back trying to repeat as the Senior LPGA is played again on the French Lick Resort's Pete Dye Course. She'll actually be trying for her third straight title at French Lick, as Johnson also won the 2016 Legends Tour tournament on the layout. U.S. Senior Women's Open winner Laura Davies and runner-up Juli Inkster are also expected to compete.

"People ask me what is my favorite course, and I always said St. Andrews, but I have to say, this place has certainly taken over," Johnson said after last year's triumph.

Golf Channel will televise all three days and fans are welcome. For more information, see www.frenchlick.com.

Illini Double Their Hosting Pleasure

Illinois' men's golf team has hosted a top tournament at Olympia Fields Country Club since 2006 – Rickie Fowler is among the individual winners – and now the women's team is getting into the act at the Chicago area's other multiple-course private club, Medinah. The inaugural Illini Women's Invitational is set for Medinah's No. 2 course on October 8-9, with 36 holes the first day and a final round for the 15 teams, including Big Ten rivals Indiana, Purdue and Wisconsin, on the second.

"We are extremely excited to be hosting this premier event at one of the most renowned private clubs in the country," Illinois coach Renee Slone said. "The elite field is sure to provide an exciting competition and a strong test of skill on the newly designed Course 2."

The Tom Bendelow layout was refurbished two years ago and reopened in June 2017. It features seven sets of tees, more than Medinah's other two courses.

Stonebridge Saves Birdies for Charity

On Labor Day evening, as Birdies for Charity event co-chair and pro Chris Gumbach watched the skies open and the rain-soaked River Forest Country Club go from playable to unplayable in a matter of minutes, he wasn't sure if the eighth Birdies for Charity fundraising event could be played the next day as scheduled.

Enter Andrew Stevens, the professional at Stonebridge Country Club in Aurora, and the club's Board, who offered their course as an alternate site in the nick of time.

Illinois PGA Professionals made 1,014 birdies to raise a record \$378,000 to benefit children's charities including Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, JDRF Illinois Chapter, Ronald McDonald House Charities of Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana, Illinois PGA Foundation and bonus charities Cal's Angels and Folds of Honor. The eight-year event total now stands at nearly \$1.4 million.

We-Ko-Pa

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"The Golf Suites are ideal for anything from casual buddy trips to corporate outings," said Matt Barr, general manager of We-Ko-Pa Golf Club. "They allow groups to gather together after the round and continue the fun in a spacious, comfortable setting where they can play cards, or watch the game of the day."

This certainly satisfies the where-to-stay question, but how about the what-to-do factor? Quick answer: golf and other fun stuff.

Cholla and Saguaro have much in common. Both are meticulously maintained, receive high praise from golf media and guests alike, and offer quality experiences punctuated by the sights and sounds of the desert and nothing else. But they're not without distinction. Cholla features desert golf-style challenges, while Saguaro was designed with more of a traditional look and feel.

"We couldn't be happier with the way the golf courses turned out," said Barr. "They each have a unique personality, and the surrounding desert is teeming with wildlife and mountain views."

Designed by Scott Miller, the Cholla course emerged this fall after a \$1.8 million renovation that included replacing tired bermuda grass on the greens with a faster-rolling MiniVerde variety, new bunkers, irrigation infrastructure, replacing six acres of turf with native plants, and changes to No. 8.

The fairway on this 605-yard, par 5 narrows as it plunges toward a deep, dry desert arroyo that runs across the front of the green, which left limited space to place a second-shot layout. The landing area was widened and part of the arroyo was grassed to create a more realistic risk/reward scenario.

"After 15 years, it was time to reinvigorate Cholla to maintain the type of conditions consistent with the high level of playability our guests have come to expect," said Matt Barr.

Saguaro – designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw – incorporates desert golf with traditional golf course design. It's built for walking, with greens situated near the next tee. It follows the natural movement of the land, and the playing corridors are wider – some much wider – compared to Cholla. When the particular patch of ground is flat and open, the hole is, too. Likewise, when the landscape pitches and rolls, so does

the layout. And just like Cholla, Saguaro recently underwent its own preventative maintenance project which consisted of replacing all the sand and inspecting the drain lines of each bunker.

If you can't decide which to play or how often to play each award-winning golf course, don't worry. We-Ko-Pa offers incredible stay-and-play packages as well as 36-hole packages so you can take your time exploring the similarities and differences of each course.

"They're both amazing, but they're both very different," said Eric Dettman, We-Ko-Pa's head professional. "Saguaro,

for example, is perfect for winter walking with wide fairways guarded by iconic Coore-Crenshaw bunkers. And Cholla will test your strategic thinking and shot selection. You really have to play them both to get a feel of the desert, but you haven't really played desert golf until you've played We-Ko-Pa."

These two courses have enough twists and turns to keep even the most discriminating golfer as interested in their 50th round as their first, but Fort McDowell Adventures opens up an entire desert full of other recreational activities.

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