

Golf Writers' Extravaganza: The Xona Golf Media Classic

It is a FAM (short for "familiarity") trip like no other. As a golf-travel writer, I have journeyed far and wide in the company of other writers over the last dozen years, about 70 trips in total. But the Xona Golf Media Classic in Scottsdale, Ariz., dwarfs the rest in terms of sheer size and scope, not to mention fun and festivity. Most FAMs I've participated in previously have five to 10 writers involved, occasionally a few more, but rarely above 20. It's important to keep the group size manageable for logistical reasons involving travel to and from, transport throughout, golf course access, property tours, mealtime, etc.

The Xona tosses that limited-scope notion on its ear. One-hundred or more writers, editors, broadcasters, bloggers, et al descend on Scottsdale every December for a four-day jamboree of good golf, valuable networking, lavish banquets and a shopping cart full of swag. It's all the brainchild of longtime Phoenix-area golf writer Bill Huffman, who started the Media Classic nearly a decade ago.

"Gordon Zuckerman, who owned Xona Resort at the time, and I came up with the Media Classic in 2002," explains Huffman, who spent 25 years in total as the golf writer for the Arizona Republic and the East Valley Tribune. He is also the author of the seminal coffee-table book on the unforgettable golf offerings in the Grand Canyon State, called "Arizona's Greatest Golf Courses."

"The event was designed to rejuvenate the spectacular Scottsdale golf scene after a rough period that followed 9/11," continues Huffman, whose radio program "The Golf Show" is broadcast twice weekly on Fox Sports in the Phoenix area. "We just wanted golf writers and broadcasters to come out and play golf in Arizona and experience the great golf and wonderful weather. The first year we had 40 participants just kept growing. The last three years we've limited it to 100."



One of the Beautiful Holes at Southern Dunes

The fortunate participants in this most recent iteration enjoyed some of the nicest tracks in the Valley, including the private **Desert Forest Golf Club** (www.desertforestgolfclub.com), widely considered the first desert-style course ever built, and well-ensconced among America's Top 100 Classic Courses as designated by Golfweek. In 1962, architect Robert "Red" Lawrence carved the course from existing desert landscape, with virtually no soil having been removed or shaped during course construction. Its environmentally neutral setting is still its hallmark. Driving corridors are tight and twisting, and with no fairway bunkering to catch offline tee balls bounding down the firm fairways, visits to the desert are inevitable for all but the very straightest of drivers.

Superstition Mountain's Prospector Course (www.superstitionmountain.com), created by Jack and Gary Nicklaus, was also on the Media Classic agenda. Relatively speaking, it appears as expansive as Manhattan's Central Park after the constrictions of Desert Forest. It's not quite wall-to-wall grass, but offers a far roomier playing field than the early-'60s classic. One of the most striking features of the 7,185-yard Prospector Course is an oasis-like water feature that extends the length of the 18th hole, with a multi-tiered green set in an amphitheater-type setting. Virtually the entire course, which served as the home of the LPGA's Safeway International for several years through the middle portion of the last decade, is surrounded by majestic views of the Superstition Mountains.

We-Ko-Pa's esteemed Cholla course (www.wekopa.com), a Scott Miller design that opened late in 2001, was next on the visitation list. "The lush vegetation, natural drainage corridors and unique topographic conditions make the site ideally suited for a spectacular golf venue," explains the architect. "The location offers panoramic vistas, including the McDowell Mountains, Red Mountain, the Verde River and the Matalazal Mountains, which are highlighted by the prominence

of the often snow-capped Four Peaks formation." Also on site is the Saguaro Course, created by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, giving We-Ko-Pa one of the most formidable one-two punches in the desert Southwest.

And finally we visited **Southern Dunes** (www.golfsoutherndunes.com), a unique offering by the highly respected Scottsdale-based golf design firm of Schmidt-Curley Design, Inc., in consultation with longtime PGA Tour star Fred Couples. Southern Dunes offers wide-open views in all directions. Spread out over 320 acres, the course is wild-looking, with rugged land forms covered in native grasses. In its previous iteration, before opening to the public at large, it was a "men-only" club with a healthy sprinkling of members culled from the city's pro sports teams like the NBA's Phoenix Suns and baseball's Arizona Diamondbacks. It is no short jaunt from Scottsdale down to Maricopa where the course is located, which might be one of the reasons the course has undergone its struggles. But it is rather convenient to the Sky Harbor Airport, only about 30-odd minutes away.

Superior golf venues and fine fêtes are well and good, and greatly appreciated by the workings scribes. But the truly amazing thing about the Xona Golf Media Classic is its pennies-on-the-dollar tariff. Participants enjoy the four rounds of golf, four nights lodging at the Xona Resort Suites in the heart of Scottsdale, pretty much every meal, and nightly soirees that put most large-scale weddings or upscale Christmas parties to shame, all for about the price of a single round of premium golf. But the larger point is that one doesn't have to be a member of the Fourth Estate to enjoy phenomenal golf values in and around Scottsdale in these troubled economic times.

Brent DeRaad is the executive vice president of the Scottsdale Convention and Visitors Bureau, and has lived in Arizona for 25 years. "It is well-known that Scottsdale features some of the world's finest daily-fee courses," explains DeRaad, himself an avid golfer. "But the recession and the waning of interest in golf, with fewer rounds being played, we've found that the pricing structure of golf in the region, and the green fees themselves have really been reduced in recent times."

The Iowa native uses marquee names like Grayhawk and Troon North as examples. "Several years ago at our peak, the rack rates for that type of golf course would be in the neighborhood of \$250-\$300. Now depending on the packages you can find, you can access the same courses during high season (January through April) for \$150 to \$200, which is a reduction of 30% or more."

DeRaad goes on to state that factoring in shoulder season, summer rates, and mid-tier courses a step below top-end venues like the aforementioned, rates have dropped even more precipitously. "You can access great golf courses in our region for less than \$100, and in some cases more like \$40-\$50 per round. We

have nearly 50 public-access courses in Scottsdale and, all told, at least 150 public-access courses in the Valley of the Sun. We are easy to get to, with flights from about 100 cities heading here everyday. Avid golfers have just always been attracted to Scottsdale."

And in the current economy, those same avid golfers are further attracted to Scottsdale because of the much-welcomed pricing structure.

For more information visit www.visitscottsdale.com.