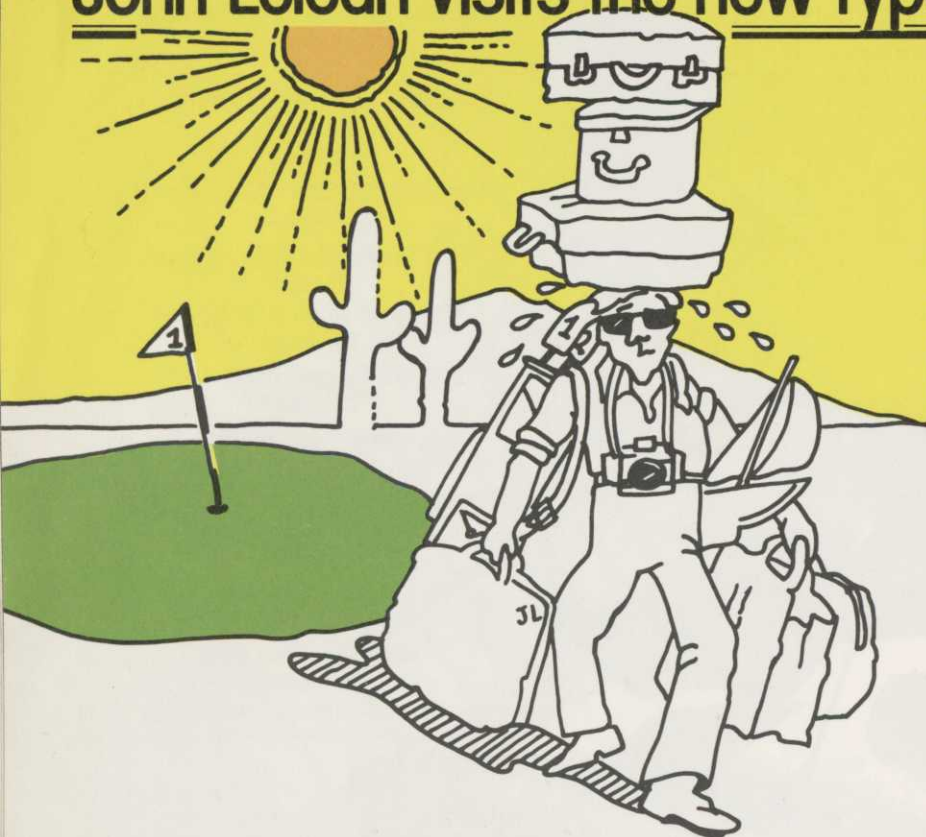


ARIZONA GOLF COURSES

John Lelean visits the new type of desert courses.



Arizona can almost be described as the State of 'instant golf courses'. The homeland of the Navajo and Hopi Indians, has now been transformed from the stark desert terrain so familiar to viewers of western films by the engineering miracles of irrigation. First by the construction of the Roosevelt Dam and then, in 1936, by the building of the mammoth Hoover Dam on the Colorado River.

The raw inhospitable desert where only sage bushes and cacti flourish would seem to be about the last place to produce lush fairways and billiard table greens, but a combination of the right grass seed and an abundance of water has transformed Phoenix Valley into one of the fastest growing cities in the United States.

The climate in Arizona, hot in Summer, pleasantly warm in Winter, with a low humidity, is attracting vast numbers of people from all over the United States. Many come to escape the harsh winters further north, others to live and work in this developing and thriving tourist area.

There are currently over one hundred golf courses in the Valley with around twenty more under construction to cater for a population of about a million people. A fair proportion are municipal, but the majority have been developed by real estate property companies, where the financial return is achieved by selling and renting what is known in the USA as condominiums. Flats, houses and maisonettes adjacent to the course, which invariably includes the right to membership of the club.

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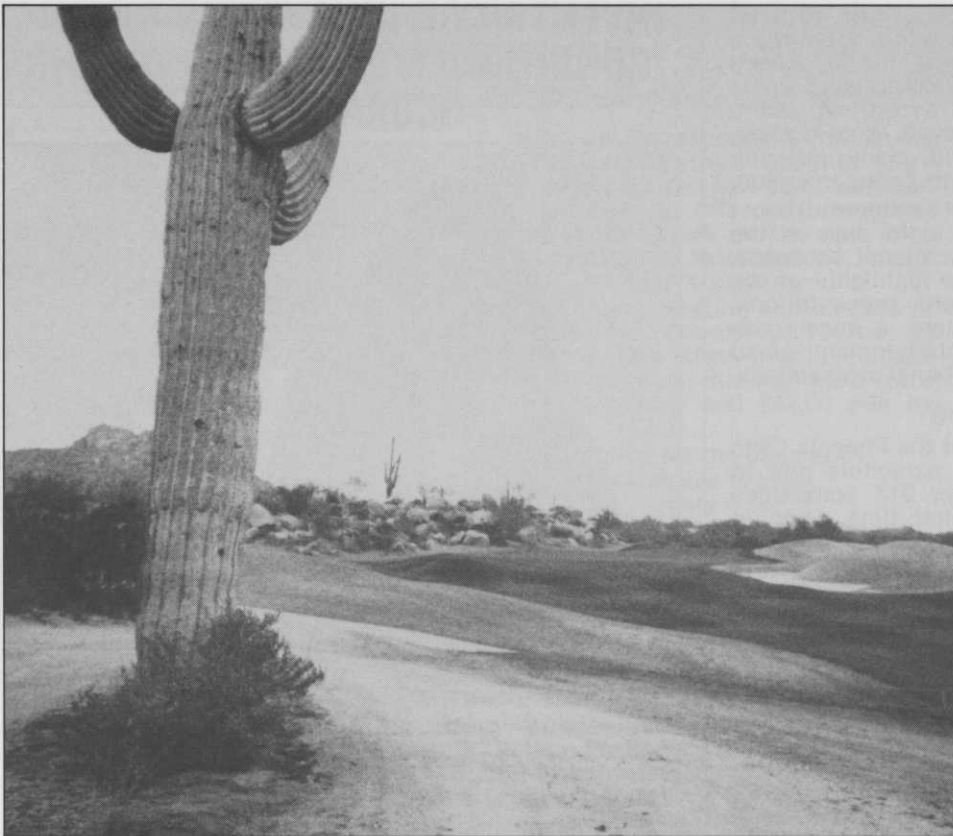
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The seventh at Troon Village showing the differing shades of ryegrass winter fairway and bermuda grass collars.

Two of Arizona's finest championship golf courses have been built 25 miles to the north of Phoenix at Scottsdale under the mountain known as Pinnacle Peak. Desert Highlands, the first to be constructed, was to a design by Jack Nicklaus, the second a few yards across the highway, the newest of the two, Troon Village designed by Tom Weiskopf and architect Jay Morrish.

“We didn't even use any drawings - it was already there”

The par three, fifteenth hole, 'Troon Mountain' was recently included in the 100 greatest holes on all American golf courses by the Golf magazine. "This was a natural", said Tom Weiskopf. "I saw that hole in my mind right away. We didn't even use any drawings - it was already there".

Troon Village is a truly desert course, where the lush velvet fairways wind through the giant cacti. Lakes abound, a strange sight in a landscape more associated with the wild west and bands of marauding Indians.

Domestic water for the valley is brought down from the Colorado River by concrete lined canals. The water to irrigate the ever increasing number of golf courses is provided by reclaiming and purifying the sewage effluent. A double use of one supply.

It is said to be completely uncontaminated, though dead fish were seen around the edges of the lakes at both Troon, the Tournament Players Club at Scottsdale and further south at Ocotillo, a course built on rejected farming land. In all probability it is unlikely to be the water, but possibly a fish fungal disease or mis-placed herbicide.

The greens at most courses are sown with Pennncross, providing a firm true and fast putting surface. Certainly at the four courses already mentioned and another par 60 called El Caro all had firm greens despite the need for constant irrigation.

The drainage system under the sand construction destroyed the myth that all American golf courses have wet, soggy, target type greens. To stop the ball on the green requires just as much golfing skill as it does on Britain's championship links.

Playing Ocotillo, what was believed to be a fine second shot to the green across the lake with a fairway wood failed to hold and bounced through. What is more the pitch mark was scarcely discernible.

Tees are mainly sown with Pennncross Eagle and the fairways and rough, if one could insult the fairway collars as rough, are seeded with Bermuda grass.

Bermuda grass dies off during the winter months to show a two to three inch depth of thick dead light brown coloured matting. Not difficult to play from but requiring a firm wrist action to regain the cut grass area.

To provide the dense velvet fairways during the winter months the course is oversown with rye grass. This in turn dies out in the summer heat when the Bermuda grass grows through.

Several courses allowed the bunker surrounds to be framed by the dead Bermuda grass, which made them look as if the collars had been sprayed with a herbicide but it did bring the sand traps into focus and they were visually very attractive from the tee positions.

The small party of British Greenkeepers who visited the Troon Village and the T.P.C. at Scottsdale were made most welcome by the course management and were given every facility to walk the course and see the construction and maintenance techniques employed.

Much of the equipment is similar to that used in Britain. Greens are cut with a triplex, mainly Jacobsen and Toro; fairways with the 350D or similar machines.

At Troon Village we were all impressed with the ultra tidiness of the course. There was nothing out of place. Even the recent cut divots on the fairways had been freshly repaired with a sand and seed mixture.

Every two or three holes a large container of fresh water, with a column of paper cups was sited by the tee. This was a feature found at all the golf clubs visited. At Ocotillo they went one better when a caddy car with a rear mounted bar arrived driven by a blonde candidate for 'page 3' offering iced beers or something softer.

Staffing levels are considerably higher than in Britain. Again our party were noticeably green with envy while playing Ocotillo to see four Mexican greenstaff raking one bunker with wire sprung rakes. Nearby four more were taking weed from the lake surface using scoops on 20 feet poles. At least four others were seen cutting fairways and approaches with the Jacobsen HF5, a Toro 350 and a Ransomes 180.

Golf in the United States is big business and treated as such by the financiers. Wage rates reflect the importance given to those who manage the golf courses. Not only salaries but status as well is at a premium.

The Course Manager, Superintendent is regarded as the most important person at the club.

He ranks above the professional and often above the administrator of even the most prestigious club house complex. It is recognised that without his abilities to keep the course in perfect order, the other functions such as restaurant, professional's shop and sales of property would not exist.

‘Kings within their own Kingdom’

The standard of the golf course has a direct bearing on the price that can be asked for the surrounding property. With competition so fierce to bring in new property owners, the top superintendents are 'Kings within their own Kingdom'.

Troon Village is a case in point. As the newest of the two courses at Pinnacle Peak there is tremendous competition with Desert Highlands built some two years earlier.

To become a member at Troon, one first has to buy a plot of land, currently selling at 250,000 dollars. Membership of the club then costs 25,000 dollars plus a subscription of about 175 dollars a month.

Potential members at these prices are hardly queueing to join so the standard of the golf is paramount.

We were told Troon has a current membership of 62, but they are hoping to entice some of the Desert Highland members to sell their property and cross the road!

The club rules state - no casual visitors -, but if you can find a member willing to pay a hundred dollars to take you round as a guest then the delights of this magnificent golf course are yours.