

## A Golf Adventure in Arizona: Cursin' Amid the Cacti



If you're interested in embarking on an eight-day, seven-night Golf Adventure in Arizona, I have a tried and true itinerary for you.

Last week, I was invited as a journalist to join a slightly-grizzled "Group of Seven" Canadian golfers who know their way around the USA, its best bargain courses, and the kitchen!

My first golf vacation in Arizona with these seasoned veterans did not open as smoothly as a nice drive up the middle. In fact, it was a muddle. A series of almost-comedic logistical ?calamities? challenged our intrepid lead travel party of two ? courtesy of Air Canada's clusterf#@%\$ at Pearson. Three gate changes including direction to a mythic gate, a cancelled flight, and a rescheduled delayed flight kept us hopping through Terminal 1.

Consequently, we arrived at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix too late to pick up our rental van which was cancelled, despite our SOS call from Toronto. RG and I resembled the exasperated Steve Martin and hapless John Candy characters in a remake of Planes, Trains, and Automobiles, dragging our luggage and oversized golf bags off the carousel, lugging the unwieldy multi-sized luggage items across three Terminals and up escalators to board the Sky Train, spewing invective at an absent rental car rep who closed the rental store three minutes early, and ending up in an eerily-empty taxi zone with no taxis or Ubers.

When all looked lost at Sky Harbor, Earl the Good Samaritan Taxi Driver picked us up in a deserted corner of the airport before we became crime statistics in the desert, much like the fate of many extras in Breaking Bad. We stuffed Earl's Altima with suitcases in the trunk and two oversized golf bags in the back seat behind which RG reclined rather uncomfortably. The congenial cabbie carted us to La Quinta hotel in Phoenix at 2.30 a.m. (5.30 EDT).

However, the sun did come up the next day at La Quinta, a hot breakfast was enjoyed with delightful Babbs from Minnesota, and our first full day in Phoenix went off without a glitch. After a ?kick save and a beauty? by RG and the CAA secured us a last-minute minivan, we collected the remaining six-pack of golfers arriving at Sky Harbour to round out our Octet.

We donned our cool glasses to witness the 64% totality of the Solar Eclipse at the airport, secured our second minivan, and it was off to a patio lunch and the pleasures of a covered, state of the art driving range at Dobson Ranch Golf Course in Mesa to warm up for a week of cursin' amid the cacti.

After the range work, we reveled in the amenities of The Oasis?the aptly-named 3345 square-foot home we rented for the week in Peoria. We picked fresh lemons off the backyard trees, chipped and puttied on the artificial turf putting green, enjoyed a refreshing swim in the 72-degree F backyard pool; and gobbled down a great BBQ meal of RG's classic home-made burgers, fries, and a kale salad while watching the NCAA Purdue-UConn final on a 70? TV in a great viewing room.

Alas, Toronto's Zach Edey, the biggest Boilmaker, lost in the title game, but his brilliant play throughout March Madness raised his draft stock. The Raptors are picking 6th, 17th, and 31st in June. Fingers crossed.

This annual Arizona Golf Vacation in April is timed to coincide with March Madness's climactic game on Monday and the four rounds of the Masters on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Traveling with seven seasoned veterans of Arizona Golf adventures featured the fine cooking of RG, FG, DC, JK, and EH who prepared symphonies for the tastebuds; JS, JL, and TD served as cleaners. The cooks delivered a series of preplanned gustatory delights including lasagna with an array of grilled vegetables and garlic bread; chicken Marbella; grilled flank steak; grilled pork tenderloin; a smorgasbord of leftovers for Saturday; and the traditional Sunday meal to coincide with the final round of the Masters: Pizza and Wings from Ray's, the top-rated pizzeria in Peoria. It was the only takeout we ordered all week. All meals were washed down with the requisite amount of California red and white wine or a range of US beers.

A healthy breakfast ? cereal, bananas, yogurt, orange juice, toast or bagels, coffee or tea ? was consumed before our 6.30 departures. Our 7.30 tee-offs beat the early-April Arizona heat where afternoon highs climbed to 88-90 F. An allotment of Gatorade, water, and trail mix was placed on the kitchen table for each golfer to Grab and Go. This savvy group reminded me that it's incredibly important to stay hydrated when playing desert golf so this daily care package assured we could flourish on the fairways and play six rounds in six days.

We kicked off the Golf Adventure at idyllic Rancho Manana GC in Cave Creek, AZ on Tuesday and Wednesday. The course's sweeping vistas and abundant wildlife provided a perfect backdrop for fun in the Arizona sun. Great-tailed grackles and white-winged doves seemed to mock our efforts; wild boars and prairie dogs ambled across the fairways on the 5407-yard-high desert tract. The 6th is certainly the Club's signature hole with a spectacular view of thousands of Cacti and mesquite trees dispersed across Camelback Mountain, Mummy Mountain, Piestews Peak, and Lookout Mountain.

The scorecard even included helpful hints for each hole. For example: Hole 1: ?The largest mound is your target. Andora Wash is on your left. DON'T GO LEFT OFF THE TEE!/? Talk about Arizonian hospitality.

My playing partner, EH, put on a short game scramble clinic to card a 41 + 41. Your faithful scribe rolled out a 43 + 48 to improve Day 1's score by three strokes. Two great rounds featuring welcoming marshalls, friendly Pro Shop reception, and spectacular high desert vistas made the experience at Rancho Manara a steal of a deal. Cost of 18 holes and an electric cart: \$55 US.

Playing each of the three courses two times was a great feature of the itinerary.

On Thursday and Friday, the Octet took on Coyote Lakes GC in Surprise, AZ, a rabbit lover's haven (RG and I counted 47 rascally rabbits), but the landscape is a wee bit dangerous, too. Two seven-foot rattlesnakes were spotted in the waste bunkers of their signature hole "The Ridge". Your faithful scribe played two terrific rounds at CLGC, breaking 90 both days. Round 1 featured a Back 9 of 41 and Round 2 featured a Front 9 of 39. The early-morning tee-offs and heat of Arizona seemed to agree with me as did the cool swimming pool at "The Oasis". It was a great way to refresh the aching cables after getting acclimated to dry, 30-degree heat. Cost of 18 Holes and an electric cart: \$75 US.

The Extraordinary League of Golfing Gentlemen concluded our six-round golf marathon on Sunday morning at The 500 Club in Phoenix. We enjoyed the course's signature Number 4 Island Green as well as its hills of black volcanic rock, mesquite tree-lined fairways, and lightning-fast greens. I was thrilled to birdie the elevated and charming 162-yard Par 3 13th by dropping a steep 25-foot downhill putt. It was our second weekend round at 500 and the greens were lightning fast compared to Rancho Manara and Coyote Lakes.

The 500 Club is surrounded by a Speedway, Water Park, and Conservation Park so there is a juxtaposition of the cacophony of car racing and the tranquility of the desert depending on which side of the course you're playing. Coyotes roam freely through the golf course and its adjacent conservation area. Cost of 18 Holes and an electric cart: \$101.50 US.

Golf Vacation reading, you ask? As a nod to March Madness, I read 'I Came as a Shadow' by John Thompson, a timely tribute to the towel-toting Georgetown U coach who won the NCAA championship forty years ago in 1984! It was compelling reading ? at night in the rental as well as on the plane ? about a legendary champion basketball coach who passed away in 2020. I read til midnight in a perfectly-quiet house sipping Earl Grey tea with fresh Arizona lemon. The golfers were in bed by 10 p.m. every night to respond to our 'Wings Up' departure time of 6.30 every morning.

Staying with this theme of basketball within a golf vacation was meeting the iconic Steve Nash on and after our flight to Phoenix. I got a chance to thank him personally for setting such an MVP standard for Canadian NBA players. What a personable, modest, and approachable star! Nash took the time to make our day as big fans! The basketball star still looks like he could lace 'em up, even though he was coming off a connecting flight from Barcelona with his young family.

Meeting Steve Nash was our celebrity moment on the vacation and cheering Scottie Sheffler to an impressive Masters victory was the apex of our celebration of golf.

These seven seasoned travellers planned and executed this trip on budget. Securing the house as well as trips for food and booze at Costco made the trip very economical. It saved us a fortune in hotel and restaurant meals. In fact, our resident logistics expert TD budgeted \$2k for food, wine, and beer for 8 guys for 8 days. TD refunded us \$50 each at the airport for coming in under budget. Beer and wine are tremendously inexpensive in AZ and we secured chicken for 99c a pound at Costco. We ate and drank like kings of the links, as this esteemed group of semi-retired Canadians have been doing for over thirty years.

I hope I get an invitation to join them in April 2025 when they head to San Diego for more fun in the sun.

Enjoy the golf season in Ontario! It is upon us!

**By Jim Stewart**