20TH ANNIVERSARY
THE SOPRANOS
THE STORY CONTINUES
Imagine a cactus. There are nearly 2,000 different kinds of cacti around the globe, but odds are very good that the one you are picturing is the saguaro, tall and green with curving arms raised towards the sky—the stuff of Road Runner cartoons. It is the quintessential cactus, yet surprisingly it is only found in one ecosystem, the Sonoran Desert, a relatively tiny chunk of the earth’s real estate. The Sonoran Desert also happens to be the ideal setting for desert golf, a dramatic landscape that resembles the ocean floor, with a tumultuous, boulder-strewn rocky surface that is never quite flat, filled with fissures in the form of arroyos, and crowned with myriad types of cacti that eerily mirror varieties of coral, such as branch, brain and roof. It is gorgeous and scary at the same time.

Standing guard like a silent sentry, a mature saguaro cactus watches over the first green at The Boulders, one of the many striking golf courses found in Scottsdale, Arizona.
OASIS IN THE DESERT

The TPC Scottsdale Stadium Course offers stunning beauty that define its landscape. Golfers like Phil Mickelson (below) look like Colosseum gladiators when playing it.

When golf was born in the coastal dunes of Scotland more than 800 years ago, there was just one style of design, links golf. As the game gained popularity it quickly grew inland, and heathland and parkland styles have existed for centuries. But a fourth major design style would not be added until 1962, when accomplished designer Rees Lawrence carved out the private Desert Forest Club course in Carefree, just north of Scottsdale, Arizona. He left nearly two-thirds of the course in its innate wasteland state, minimizing turf and following the natural contours, creating a risk and reward strategic gem that has remained ranked in the nation's Top 100 ever since.

Desert Forest created the mold for superior desert golf. Often called target golf, this type of course can require hitting from one tee shot to the next while braving beautiful but harshly penal surroundings. The best desert courses look as if an artist painted islands of green onto a khaki background, and then crumbled up the canvas to form jagged peaks and valleys.

"The appeal of golf in the desert has to do with the sharp contrast of playing surfaces," says Bradley Klein, the longtime former Architecture Editor for Golfweek magazine. "The contrast of textures is especially strong when you have lush, soft green courses seemingly helicoptered in to these harsh, forbidding surroundings. There's a lot of plant life on the desert floor; and it's of such strange beauty—saguaro cacti, prickly pear, cholla—that you can't get it out of your mind while you're playing.

"The Sonoran Desert has been proven to be the very best setting for desert golf design on the planet, and its epicenter is where the style was born—the greater Scottsdale area, known in golf travel parlance as the "Valley of the Sun." Every top course architect alive has eagerly made the pilgrimage here to lay out fairways and greens in this spectacular setting.

Today, Scottsdale has quality courses and natural beauty in spades, but it also has several other assets that make it one of the world's favorite golf vacation destinations. "Scottsdale is one of the few of the country's major golf destinations where you don't have to make any compromises," says longtime local Tom Lehman, U.S. Open champ and former Ryder Cup captain. "It's easy to reach from anywhere in the country. The weather is great. The courses and resorts are world-class, and you'll never run out of things to do off the course." Because of the great weather, flight access and dense concentration of top-tier courses, many other golf stars live here, including Phil Mickelson, Tom Weiskopf, Cristie Kerr, Kirk Triplett, Hale Irwin, Billy Mayfair and many others. But for visitors coming on vacation,
Scottsdale offers even more; many of the best designs are anchored to five-star luxury resorts. It’s also one of the nation’s more cigar-friendly golf destinations.

While most come for the region’s signature desert golf, you’ll find every kind of layout here, even courses with wall-to-wall grass. “Designers have long known that the world’s best environment for building desert courses is the Sonoran Desert, and this is its heart and soul,” says golf writer Michael Patrick Shiels. Despite the overwhelming number of choices, the city layout makes planning a golf vacation here surprisingly easy. The biggest choice is where to stay, with luxury resorts featuring different styles and characters, and the rest is a short drive away. These are the best options for your trip.

Fairmont Scottsdale Princess & TPC Scottsdale

The longest-running AAA Five-Diamond resort in Arizona (27 straight years), the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess is the tallest of the full-service luxury resorts in town. The sprawling 750-room complex has multiple restaurants, bars, pools, one of the largest and most lavish spas in the Southwest and two exceptional golf courses. The lodging highlight is a Fairmont Gold boutique hotel with-in-the-ballard with just 69 superior rooms and private lounge. There is also a caustic section of the resort with 119 larger and more residential-style units. The latest addition is the Sunset Beach pool complex, which features a sparkling white-sand beach.

The resort is home to two celebrity chefs. Michael Mina has a spot in his popular Bourbon Steak here, with an extensive whiskey list, and Richard Sandoval operates a fine-dining Mexican eatery in the hotel and restaurant, and has a restaurant and cigar bar at the golf club house. The Princess is especially popular with golfers playing the TPC courses, which are immediately adjacent to and operated by the hotel, but is also frequented by those playing elsewhere who want the all-inclusive, high-end resort experience, though this can also come with a convention feel as the property hosts many corporate events and outings.

The TPC has two courses, and both were recently and extensively renovated with new bunkers, greens and tees. The most popular by far is the Stadium Course (rating: 4), originally designed by Jay Morrish and Tom Weiskopf, and home to the annual Waste Management Phoenix Open. This is the most attended golf tournament in the United States on grounds, so it’s a good time to visit.

Cigars in the Desert

Scottsdale offers plenty of places to light up, but its desert climate is the envy of handmade cigars, which were born in the hushed tropics.

Never leave your cigars out in the open air (even in your hotel room) as they will dry out quickly. Remember to keep your cigars in a travel humidor or a fabric bag to keep them safe and smoking well.

These resorts and golf courses have plenty of cigar-friendly venues, but for more in the Scottsdale area visit www.cigarsafeonline.com

The pro shop at the Ritz-Carlton is located next to the new Mitchell Store, which just underwent a $15 million renovation.

Troon North is located next to the Troon Course, which just underwent a $15 million renovation.
Four Seasons Scottsdale at Troon North

The Monument course at Troon North, famous for its namesake towering boulder in the middle of the third fairway, is the design that put desert courses and Scottsdale on the world golf radar and is considered the prototype of the region's many highly acclaimed layouts. It also anchored the high-end daily fee or "member for a day" public experience when it opened in 1989. Troon North Golf Club has two 18s, Monument (Rating: A-1) and Pinnacle (A-2), both known for showcasing giant granite boulders and eerie rock formations with frequently elevated tee boxes that overlook the fairways, and a surprising amount of elevation change and contour.

Both courses are visually stunning, and both are ranked in the Top 50 Golf Magazine, but this comes with a caveat. Monument, the original course by Jay Morrish and Tom Weiskopf, was long the region's highest-ranked design. But when the second course here opened, called Pinnacle, and designed by Weiskopf as a solo project, it didn't live up to its older sibling's lofty reputation. It had a nearly half-mile gap between holes at one point, making it unwalkable. So, a decade later, the two courses were renovated, creating two walkable layouts. It improved the quality of Pinnacle, but loweret that of Monument, leaving two very good courses instead of a stunner and a good one.

Most guests who never played the original Monument don't really notice, and enjoy these two quite memorable desert golf experiences, which are augmented by the state's only Four Seasons hotel, a luxury resort hidden among the rocky canyons of Scottsdale's northern suburb, giving it an escapist vibe. The hotel just underwent a $15 million renovation that included new contemporary decor, furnishings, and artwork in all 220 suites and suites. Its cassette-style, low-rise adobe wings feature large rooms with gas fireplaces and Southwestern flair. For cigar lovers, the hotel has a pronounced indoor/outdoor emphasis, with all accommodations featuring large balconies or ground-floor patios, some with outdoor firepits, while half now include 60-inch outdoor televisions. The culinary options are more fun than the sometimes staid luxury brand's typical offerings, with a fine-dining Spanish steakhouse, Talavera, and a bit of Old West flair at Proof, which specializes in American comfort foods and boasts a deep Bourbon list. There is also an upscale craft cocktail bar, Onyx, and second waterfall hole poolside, along with a private cabanas. The Onyx bar and lounge is a humidor with about a dozen top-name cigars, and guests are permitted to smoke on the patio.

The Boulders

Many of Scottsdale's top courses are clustered in the northern suburbs, and here in aptly named Carefree is one of the region's longest running luxury resorts, The Boulders, which went through a massive, multimillion-dollar renovation in 2012. The Boulders embraces the rocky, rugged desert setting, most famously in its 160 freestanding casitas—there are no conventional hotel "rooms" here. These irregularly shaped individual units look like they were dropped in from "The Planet." They are spacious, boast wood-burning fireplaces and private patios, and have all-new interiors.

The Talking Stick Stick Shadows Cigar Lounge is a cigar aficionado's haven, with an impressive selection of Scotches and cigars.

The spa was also redone, and is huge relative to the size of the resort: stretching over 1,400 acres, the resort has biking, tennis and other outdoor activities, including its own gorgeous 26-hole desert golf facility, with a clubhouse so extensively renovated it is essentially new, with a bar, outdoor cocktail patio and a new restaurant.

There are humidors in the main lobby bar and golf clubhouse, with a dozen brands including such rarities as Fuente Fuente Opus X and Liga Privada. All guest casitas and villas have private patios for smoking, and there are numerous outdoor fireplaces with seating at the restaurants.

The Boulders Golf Club is sometimes overlooked by visitors not staying here, but should not be missed. It has two classic Jay Morrish desert layouts, North (B+) and South (B+). Both are beautiful, strategically challenging and extremely well maintained, often with the area's best conditions. Each course showcases the 12-million-year-old rock formations on the site, with stacks of boulders behind greens framing approaches, and many holes require careful shot placement due to ravines. The putting surfaces are bentgrass, expensive to maintain but better for play. You'll find more water on the South course, but it is a little bit shorter. The resort has a stellar practice facility, and almost everyone who stays or visits plays both. You should too.

The Talking Stick Casino Resort

Markedly different from the other top lodging choices in town, Talking Stick is a full-blown casino hotel, with all the 24/7 excitement, lights, sounds and cocktails that go with it—it's either your style or it is not. But the 36 holes here, designed by Bill Coore and

Go Time

Spring and fall are absolutely perfect peak seasons in the Scottsdale area. Winter mornings get a bit chilly, but it is still one of the best choices in the Continental United States, with February highs in the mid-70s. Summer is famously hot, consistently over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, but as the mercury rises prices drop astronomically, making summer in Scottsdale arguably the best value in great golf anywhere. As a result, there really is no bad time of year for Scottsdale golf. —L.D.
Ben Crenshaw and managed by Troon Golf, are absolutely for
everyone. The resort is closer to downtown Scottsdale than its
rivals to the North, and the terrain is radically different. Instead of
target-style designs that require you to hit from one patch of green
to the next, these feature wall-to-wall turf with almost no trees.
The risk/reward choices are subtle but constant, with almost every
ehole offering a tighter driving line that pays off with a much easier
approach shot. This requires real consideration on the tee, and is
especially poignant when playing it second time. You can make
easy bogeys by playing it safe and save birdies by taking risks.

The challenging O'odham course (A) has heavily bunkered
greens, thick, penal brush, and is considered the marquee layout,
but in many ways the Pipsupah course (A) is more scenic, varied
and fun. They complement each other.

Even though it's just off the highway and a more urban location,
'Walking Stick has an oasis feel, with no homes visible from the
courses and little around it, with expansive vistas of the McDowell
mountains. The hotel has a wide range of rooms and suites, as well
as the broadest array of dining options of any top resort here. The
casino is notably home to Shadow's Lounge, a hidden and consider-
able large indoor and outdoor cigar bar. It has an impressive drink
cist, with around 50 single malts. You'll also find cigars at the golf
cub (Plena, Macanudo, Punch, Romeo y Julieta) and you can
smoke on the patio around a large fire pit overlooking the courses.

We-Ko-Pa Golf Club

Of all the great 26-hole facilities in Scottsdale, We-Ko-Pa is the best,
and worth the trip whenever you are staying. You can stay on site at
the We-Ko-Pa Resort, but it is somewhat remote and not on par in
terms of the luxury available in the area. The casino here is 24 years
old, with plans for a new one scheduled for 2020.

But you must come for the golf, for We-Ko-Pa has the two
highest-ranked Scottsdale courses by Golf Magazine, Cholla (rating A), designed by Scott Miller in 2002, came first, and was
followed by Saguaro (A) in 2007 by Comer and Crenshaw. All
100-plus bunkers on Saguaro were redone as part of a course
upgrade at the end of 2018. The minimalist courses combine the
best of the local desert beauty and dramatic landscape with risk/
reward decision making. On almost every hole (other than the
par 3) the golfer has a wide range of choices of clubs to hit, and
you might tee off with everything from a low iron to a fairway
wood in addition to a driver during a round.

The courses at We-Ko-Pa are among the most walkable in the
region. Both are so good it is hard to choose between them, so
many visitors play both in the same day. They sell cigars in the
clubhouse on and on beverage carts and have these different smoking
areas, including a very large covered patio between the pro shop
and main restaurant, the We-Ko-Pa Grille. There is also a cigar-
friendly patio at the smaller Saguaro Grill satellite restaurant.

Grayhawk Golf Club

The club championship boards at Grayhawk are filled with famous
names. The two layouts have hosted a number of high-profile
events, and have long served as a pro-am venue for the Waste
Management Phoenix Open. From 2020 to 2022 it will host the
NCAA Men's and Women's National Championships.

The Raptor course (B+) was designed by Tom Fazio and
stretches just over 7000 yards, with generous fairways and large
greens, but plenty of protection in the form of deep grassside
bunkers, harsh desert waste and water. Talon (B+) was done by
David Graham and Gary Panks. It is known for its large, multi-tiered
greens, confidence inspiring the eye but reducing their effective
size, and unlike its neighbor, has little penalty for missing the
greens, encouraging a lot of up and down heroes.

Both courses throw a little bit of everything at the visitor—if it's
your first stop you might feel shock and awe. There is plenty of
desert, plus creeks, ravines, elevation changes, mountain vistas,
do-or-die horizons, deep, railroad-tie-faced bunkers, an island green
and even a five-tiered waterfall next to the final hole on Talon. In
terms of design, Talon and Raptor are not held in as high esteem as
We-Ko-Pa and Troon North, but they are plenty of fun.

Grayhawk, which has no on-site lodging, has a long affiliation
with Phil Mickelson, Phil's Grill is named after him, and the
restaurant has a humidor with offerings from Macanudo, Ashton,
Romeo y Julieta, Punch, and a cigar-friendly patio.

Most visitors enjoy lunch at Phil's Grill between rounds.

Then again, most visitors to Scottsdale enjoy everything about
their golf trip.