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Life / Travel

Arizona, Phoenix: Golf in the Valley of the Sun

World-class golf greens abound in and around Phoenix, Arizona.

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Troon North Golf Club's Pinnacle Course, pictured, and Monument Course at Troon North are among the highest rated daily-fee golf courses in the U.S.

By: **Becca Hensley** Freelance Travel writer, Published on Wed Mar 18 2015

They call it the Valley of the Sun. And, the rays do bear down upon its Sonoran Desert landscape a good 330 days a year. But golfing buffs know the Phoenix/Scottsdale metropolitan area best as a paradisiacal land of tees and greens. Even duffers will mutter with something smacking of religious reverence about this parcel of golf course-dotted central Arizona.

Light-drenched, cacti-studded terrain, once the haunt of Zane Grey ruffians, scorpions and rattlesnakes, the Valley of the Sun's landscape borders on otherworldly. Beneath its lavender-colored skies, amid its terrestrial-looking red boulders, anthropomorphic saguaros, and weather-cleaved arroyos, sprawl more than 200 world-class golf courses. Not the coastal, link-style expanses of Scotland or the manicured magnolia-lined greens of Augusta, Georgia, these dramatic emerald fairways have been hewed and molded from hard-to-tame tract by some of the world's most creative golf course designers. With sense of place, each course melds with the earth's fabric, yet provides a garden-like nod to well-tended (and surprisingly ecological) earthly delights. Euphoria here means driving a ball down a wide-open, cacti-lined fairway, teeing off beside a rock six storeys tall or chipping from a Lilliputian landing pad with mountain vistas. Add in annual PGA, LPGA and Champion tour events, exceedingly rare rainy days, an average annual temperature of 21 degrees Celsius, first-rate resorts equipped with swimming pools aplenty, affordable alternative lodging, and the chance to hobnob with pros like Tom Lehman or Brandel Chamblee (who live in town), and you've got (golf) game.

Any time is tee time in the Phoenix metropolitan area, which includes Scottsdale and the university town of Tempe. A thrilling winter season welcomes enthusiastic souls escaping colder climes. But January through April also means larger crowds and higher prices. Bargain hunters might consider a trip during shoulder season. Summertime is hotter, with the Bermuda grass taking hold, but there's very little humidity. Autumn brings blankets of lush rye grass and cooler temperatures. Catering to the luxury traveller, the region enjoys a plethora of upscale golf resorts — more than any other golf destination in North America. A slew of them have been rated among the Top 100 Courses You Can Play, according to Golf Magazine's 2012 ratings.

But not every course sits amid a resort. The area's newest golf offering started as a private club. Tegavah Golf Club (tegavahgolf.com) takes its name from the Yavapai word for gathering place. It vaunts a Ken Kavanaugh-designed course that wends for 7,229 yards from back tees. With a quartet of par 5s, it plays like a traditional desert-golf adventure, flanking the Verde River and shadowed by a coterie of mountains.

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Troon North Golf Club, a public bucket list play, has two award-winning courses. The Monument boasts the best scenery, but Pinnacle's design makes it walkable—a rarity among today's expansive desert courses. Troon North limits the number of daily players to ensure time and space between groups and a more relaxed pace. To nab a tee-time, take advantage of a stay at Four Seasons Scottsdale, whose partnership with Troon North gives its guests priority play.

Perhaps the area's most demanding fairways can be found at **the Boulders**, a Waldorf Astoria resort nestled in the aptly named hamlet of Carefree, minutes from downtown Scottsdale. Designed by Jay Morrish, the two 72-par championship courses are contoured into a rugged expanse of massive, pre-historic rock outcroppings and classic desert flora. The North Course, said by savvy golfers to be better balanced, flanks the desert foothills and has views of the Black Mountains. But the South Course holds the resort's signature hole, Number Five, a stunning postage-stamp-sized bit of green, shaded by a building-sized boulder. As the fairway narrows, the hole denies any margin of error—assuring any hook or slice will flump into the Sonoran rough. While male golfers rove the Boulders duet of layouts ubiquitously, the two courses are renowned, too, as female friendly — significant as women are taking up the sport en masse. Senoritas on a girlfriends' weekend, should sign up for the resort's Fore Ladies package, a three-day learn-to-play offer that includes lessons, greens time and a bevy of social activities (\$460 per person).

Though still evoking a certain Dean Martin in lime-green pants with martini aloft allure, Phoenix/Scottsdale and their collection of courses have embraced, too, a hipper, younger persona. Grayhawk Club, for example, feeds its golfers at Isabella's Kitchen, which features Italian food, and both Troon North and the Boulders have programs where they shorten the course with alternative tees to encourage children to play. The rowdiest and best-attended event in the valley takes golf to another dimension. The Waste Management Phoenix Open, held January 26-February 1 in 2015 at TPC Scottsdale, draws more than 500,000 enthusiastic spectators annually. Join them this year, as they hoot and holler at the 16th hole, known as "The Coliseum," the world's "loudest hole."

The cacophony will be music to your ears.

Beyond Golf

Cactus League Spring Training: In March, 15 major league baseball teams descend on the Valley of the Sun for spring training. Support some of your favourite teams, including the San Francisco Giants, Colorado Rockies, and Arizona Diamondbacks, all of which call Scottsdale home. Spring training allows fans to get up close and personal with their favourite athletes, and all the area's businesses join in the fun, offering special deals and events such as fun runs. Cactusleague.com

Hike It: Echo Canyon and the Cholla Trail are two hiking routes which traverse Camelback Mountain. Best at sunrise, these steep but short perambulations are awash with stones, and pass by the occasional, harrowing two-sided drop-off. The view from the top, especially aglow with dawn's pastel hues, is worth the effort, and hikers like to linger a bit before heading back down.

Art Trek: Art and architecture lovers can make a pilgrimage to Taliesin West, which reigns as Frank Lloyd Wright's desert chef-d'oeuvre. Still attracting apprentices who contemplate Wright's work, the home and studio of the revered master architect remains much the same as when it was built circa 1930. Daily tours bring the architectural wonder to life, franklloydwright.org/about/TaliesinWestTours.htm

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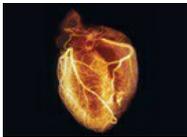


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