



PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM WARE/DESERT FOREST GOLF CLUB

FORERUNNER: Rather than fairway bunkers, designer Red Lawrence utilized native desert vegetation—such as a lone mesquite tree at the elbow of the dogleg on the reachable 535-yard par-5 16th—to dictate strategy at Desert Forest, just east of Black Mountain in Carefree.

Low-Key and Loving It

Since opening in 1962, Desert Forest Golf Club has quietly transformed the game in Arizona. By Jon Rizzi

THIS FEBRUARY, WHEN THE HOME of America's first true "desert golf course" turns 60, it will celebrate in much the same way it does every other club anniversary. There'll be a mixed couples' tournament followed by dinner. Roughly half of the club's 200 members will fill the low-slung clubhouse dining room as they would for the weekly Friday-night buffet—the only time the restaurant regularly opens for dinner.

"The 50th anniversary was a big deal, and I'm sure the 100th will be," says PGA Director of Golf Brandon Rogers, who has worked at Desert Forest Golf Club in Carefree, Ariz., since 1998. "Sixty is significant, but it's not a huge event. We take a less-is-more approach."

That understated attitude befits a golf-only club that has historically kept a low profile, but it also belies Desert Forest's influential stature in golf history. Before developers K.T. Palmer and Tom Darlington commissioned Robert "Red" Lawrence to build a course 20 miles north of Scottsdale in their new town of Carefree, Arizona golf courses bore little relation to their environments. They were parkland layouts transplanted—along with their trees—from other parts of the country.

Lawrence, who turned 79 in 1962 and had apprenticed under noted Philadelphia architect William Flynn, could have followed suit at Desert Forest. Instead, "the Desert Fox" literally charted an entirely new type of course—one that embraced all the strategic nuances of a traditional Northeastern layout, but with minimal rough and no fairway bunkers or nonindigenous plants. The Sonoran Desert—alive with mighty saguaros and spiny ocotillos, lush palo verde and mesquite trees, and flowering creosote and turpentine bushes—would serve as one glorious hazard.

The course's reputation and influence grew as the Valley did, spawning the current abundance of target-golf layouts. But Desert Forest differs from many of them in that all but one of

its holes is accessible without a carry, no paved paths ribbon the layout and most members traverse the sloping terrain on foot. Another difference is that "most courses in our area are developer-driven, to sell a house or a lot," Rogers says, noting that there isn't a residence on the 200-acre property. "And we don't have a Taj Mahal for a clubhouse."

What they do have is a paradise for golf purists that benefited from a 2013 refresh by former Coore-Crenshaw associate David Zinkand. He redid the green complexes, removed some trees and reshaped, repositioned and refilled multiple bunkers.

Six years ago, Desert Forest also instituted a caddie program—uncommon in the Southwest—that has already produced its first Evans Scholar, Evan Johnson. Coloradan Steven Kupcho, the aspiring pro who previously worked there as the caddiemaster, recently joined as a "young professional" member, as did fellow touring pros Yannik and Jeremy Paul, Patrick Flavin and Brendon Jelley.

They're attracted by the affordability, accessibility and the fact that "Desert Forest is the most difficult tournament course in Arizona for stroke play," according to Arizona Golf Association Executive Director Ed Gowan in an interview before the course hosted the 2020 Arizona Amateur.

"You have narrow landing areas," he explained. "You have to play the proper angles into the greens. The greens have a lot of movement ... and are very fast. Most desert courses in Arizona are very generous, either in the landing areas or in the greens. Desert Forest is neither."

It is, however, the progenitor of those "generous" desert courses—all of which also ply members with increasingly elaborate amenities. Yet, even at the ripe old age of 60, Desert Forest remains attractive enough to have a three-year waiting list to become a member. desertforestgolfclub.com