

No-Sweat Golf

In Hot Season, Sunbelt Courses Offer Swamp Fans, A/C Carts; Mr. Perry's Hydration Plan

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SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.

ON A RECENT afternoon in Arizona, the sun burned through a cloudless sky and shadows vanished. As the temperature climbed to 105 degrees, the vast driving range at the Westin Kierland Resort & Spa here was nearly deserted. Except for Brian Franke—who was swatting golf balls as cool air riffled across his shirt.

Mr. Franke wasn't bothered by the heat because he was standing in front of a 6-foot water-cooled fan that's part of a \$100,000 course makeover aimed at wooing golfers in the torrid summer months. "The sun beats down on you pretty hard," said Mr. Franke, a 41-year-old venture capitalist. "This is going to get me out here more often."

Across the Sunbelt, courses famous for winter golf are stepping up their pitch to get people to play in even the most sweltering summer heat—and going beyond the typical cold drinks and low-season discounts.

Last summer the Silverstone Golf Club in Las Vegas joined a growing number of Sunbelt courses that have installed an awning over the driving range. Scottsdale's Westin Kierland Resort & Spa just launched its "climate-control ex-



Christoph Hitz

perience," which offers such things as giant "swamp" fans on the driving range to golf carts equipped with cooling units that pump out frosty air. After a tough summer round, the Estrella Spa at the Viceroy golf resort in Palm Springs, Calif., has a new treat for guests who sign up for the golf and spa package: the Summer Recovery Facial—billed as "the perfect antidote to a day spent baking in the beautiful desert sun."

Trying to market golf destinations in Florida,

Arizona and Southern California during the summer has traditionally been a losing proposition, and it hasn't been getting any easier in recent years. According to the National Golf Foundation, the number of new golf courses rose 34% nationwide (and 62% in Arizona) from 1990 to 2004. At the peak of this building boom, a new course opened every 22 hours. But over the same span, the number of rounds played rose only 18%

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overall, and has been essentially flat for six years. “It was the ‘Field of Dreams’ scenario,” says Jim Koppenhaver, president of Pellucid, a research company that follows the golf industry. “They built it, but they never came.”

To complicate matters, fewer golfers are braving the summer broil. With more than 200 courses in the Phoenix area competing for players, Mike Champagne, director of golf at Kierland, says the summer drop-off can be startling. The num-

Furnace Creek, where temperatures often hit 115, refers to its hot-weather duffing as ‘Extreme Golf.’

ber of rounds played at Kierland falls from about 7,200 in March to 3,500 in August. Overall, according to the NGF, the number of rounds played in August in the Southwestern U.S. has dropped more than 5% since 2002.

Drumming Up Business

For as long as anyone can remember, of course, resorts have tried to drum up summer business by offering deep discounts and combination packages—and this year is no different. The La Quinta resort outside Palm Springs charges as little as \$179 a night for a stay-and-play package for two (with unlimited golf on five courses) that costs \$850 in peak season. The Sheraton Wild Horse Pass in Chandler, Ariz., offers package deals that combine golf with race-car lessons, cattle drives and wagon rides. And to lure in local players, who comprise up to 75% of its summer customers, Crown Golf Properties in Florida has cut its greens



Left: A golfer chills out, thanks to the Coolwell air-conditioner mounted on his golf cart. Right: Driving golf balls in front of a cooler fan.

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fees to \$54 from the \$95 winter rate and launched an airline-style rewards program for frequent players.

But golfers who venture out in the sun these days are enjoying some new inducements. On a recent Wednesday, Dave Yurkovich, a vacationing steelworker from St. Louis, arrived at the Whirlwind golf course at the Wild Horse Pass resort in polo shirt, shorts and a floppy straw hat, ready to battle the elements. But with temperatures well over 100, Mr. Yurkovich lasted only a few holes before seeking relief. He grabbed a hose connected to a small, \$400 cooling unit installed on the rear fender of his golf cart that whirs like a laptop computer and blasts out chilly air. “In this kind of heat I feel like my head starts to throb,” he says, aiming the flow at his face. “This takes away the throbbing.”

For duffers who do venture out in the swelter, perspiration has its privileges. As the morning sun spreads across the

manicured Boulders golf course in Scottsdale, sending the mercury into the 90s, Robert Perry, a 69-year-old retired airline pilot, stands at the first teebox admiring the view. “There’s nobody before us or behind us,” he says. “You can’t place a value on having your own private golf course.”

As for the heat, Mr. Perry, a regular summer player, says he prepares for it by playing in the mornings and “superhydrating” before heading to the course. Besides, he says, the dry heat in the desert isn’t any worse than a typically humid summer round back in his native Minnesota, where it’s not only hot, but “the deer flies are all over you.”

Not every golf course with unsold tee times is embracing this concept. When temperatures soar above 110 degrees, “you can’t give it away,” says Tom Patrick of the Suncor property development group, which operates six courses in the Phoenix area. By his estimate, 70% of his

company’s annual sales come from the five winter months—and that’s not likely to change any time soon. Rather than trying to market the charms of summer golf, he encourages course employees to take vacations. “When the people come back,” he says, “that’s when you market.”

Survival Strategies

For Phoenix residents like Judy Hedding, playing in the heat is almost second nature thanks to elaborate survival strategies that involve ice water, cold towels and careful shade management. But when outsiders try it, the results can be frightening. A few years ago, when Ms. Hedding’s strapping 30-year-old nephew Dale arrived from Washington D.C. to play a summer round with her, he only lasted three holes before he turned bright red and began to stagger around the course. Ms. Hedding had to take him

home and dunk him in a cold shower.

“He’ll never live it down,” she says. Nonetheless, a small number of golf entrepreneurs are bullish about the future of hot golf. Tom Rosenbaum and Ron Shostack, co-founders of Coolwell LLC, the company that makes those golf-cart air conditioners, have already invested more than \$1 million in their product—which they’ve begun pitching to courses in steamy places as far afield as Dubai. Internet auction sites such as golfUS.com and golf602.com, which sell unsold tee times at the last minute for steep discounts, rely on the sticky summer months to generate much of their business.

But nobody has embraced the concept more wholeheartedly than the Furnace Creek golf course in Death Valley, Calif.,

where temperatures of 115 degrees are fairly routine. For a \$25 greens fee, Furnace Creek provides duffers with carts, clubs, balls, tees, unlimited bottled water and a chance to experience a unique thermal challenge it has taken to calling “Extreme Golf.”

Matt Utter, a group sales manager for the Silverstone Golf Club in Las Vegas, joins a group of friends each summer at Furnace Creek to participate in a male bonding ritual they call the “Heat Stroke Invitational.” Thanks to a handful of precautions (“we don’t drink alcohol while we’re playing,” he says) the group has yet to lose any of its members to the buzzards. At least not yet. “If you’re going to play Death Valley,” Mr. Utter reasons, “you might as well play it when there’s a chance you might die.”

Hot Offerings

With the mercury rising, resorts in hot-weather spots are offering a variety of incentives to attract guests to their properties from golf packages that include air-conditioned golf carts, free flip-flops or poolside popsicles. Here’s a sampling.

COURSE/RESORT/LOCATION	PACKAGE/PRICE	COMMENTS
Westin Kierland Resort & Spa Scottsdale, Ariz.	“Chill Out on the Links” \$199 and up per night.	A one-night stay gets two people unlimited golf time, use of air-conditioned golf carts and an array of aromatherapy treatments right on the golf cart. There’s also an air-conditioned driving range.
The Boulders Resort and Golden Door Spa Carefree (Phoenix) Ariz.	“Unlimited Golf Package” \$319 per night, double occupancy	Free ice towels, cart misters and cold beverages available on the course. The resort also has a “Rent a Phoenix Vacation Home” package that gives guests discounts to stay in one of the 55 on-property villas (floor plans available on the Web site).
Bonaventure Resort & Spa Weston, Fla. (near Fort Lauderdale)	Golfanatic, \$114.50 per person per night	Package includes breakfast buffet and a round of golf at one of two courses at Bonaventure Country Club. In-room after-golf massages are \$130 extra.
Viceroy Palm Springs & Estrella Spa Palm Springs, Calif.	The His & Hers Golf/Spa Summer Package” Starting at \$1,800	Three nights in a one-bedroom villa, breakfast, golf, and a choice of one 50-minute spa treatment. For pool fiends, there’s also a “Midweek is Cooler in the Desert” promotion that includes freeflip-flops, sun-tan lotion and two poolside margarita popsicles.
Reunion Resort & Club of Orlando Near Orlando, Fla.	“The Watson Golf Package” Starts at \$208 per night.	For non-golfers, there are themed parties like a Hawaiian luau. A new swimming pavilion opens this summer with an “interactive” water playground. Resort is six miles from Disney World.