



## A FRESH LOOK AT TUCSON

The serenity pool is one of many peaceful spots at Dove Mountain.

edited by MATT GINELLA

Off the pristine back patio of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel at Dove Mountain in Tucson, two legends of the Sonoran Desert created a prickly situation for developers of the \$300 million resort. The pair of saguaro cacti are estimated to be more than 250 years old, their side arms a picture-worthy spectacle as the sun sets on the neighboring Tortolita Mountains. The original plans for the resort, which opened in December 2009, had to be finessed and the 253-room hotel moved to make sure the cacti would be unharmed. Now they're a celebrated centerpiece of the landscape. But that wasn't the only clash of old versus new I stumbled upon in Tucson. ➤➤



TRAVEL

**AWAY  
GAME**

When the World Golf Championships match-play tournament moved from La Costa, which is below sea level in Carlsbad, Calif., to the high desert of Arizona, Jack Nicklaus was commissioned to design a test for the best. The Golden Bear finished Dove Mountain in early 2009, right before the course's first Accenture Match Play that February. Thus, the focus group for this 7,849-yard brute was the top 64 players in the world.

Surprisingly, length wasn't the issue. Elevation at the course varies from 2,400 to 3,200 feet above sea level, which gives golfers about a 5 percent increase in distance. (Nicklaus estimates it plays more like 7,500 yards.) What caused the tour players trouble were the severe undulations in Dove Mountain's greens. "Jack knew going in that the course was going to be used for the Match Play," says Chet Williams, a Nicklaus Design senior associate. "So it's safe to

say he juiced the greens a bit."

Some felt Nicklaus went too far in his defense of par. Shortly after the first Match Play at Dove Mountain, the tour asked him to come back to make some of the pin areas larger and soften some of the slopes on the putting surfaces. "I don't know that the untrained eye would notice the difference," Williams says, but in 2010, more pros approved.

Any time a designer comes back to soften some of the putting slopes, it's also good news for us, the avid amateurs. Playing from 7,200 yards, I noticed some of the small greens were tough to hit and were still tough for me to putt, but as advertised, the eleva-

tion helped me off the tee, and the fairways were wide enough to consider the overall golf experience fair—and more important—fun.

Jacob Rogers, 26, a local pro who's chasing *The Dream* (playing on tour), joined me mid-round. On the eighth hole of the Saguaro nine, an uphill, 576-yard par 5, Rogers took a Tiger line off the tee, over 290 yards of cacti and collection area. He hit 7-iron into the green and made the eight-foot putt for eagle. Those two old saguaro cacti might have won their clash with construction, but based on what I saw from Rogers, the Bear might want to come back and shape some more slope into the greens.

The 191-yard third on Dove Mountain's Saguaro nine.

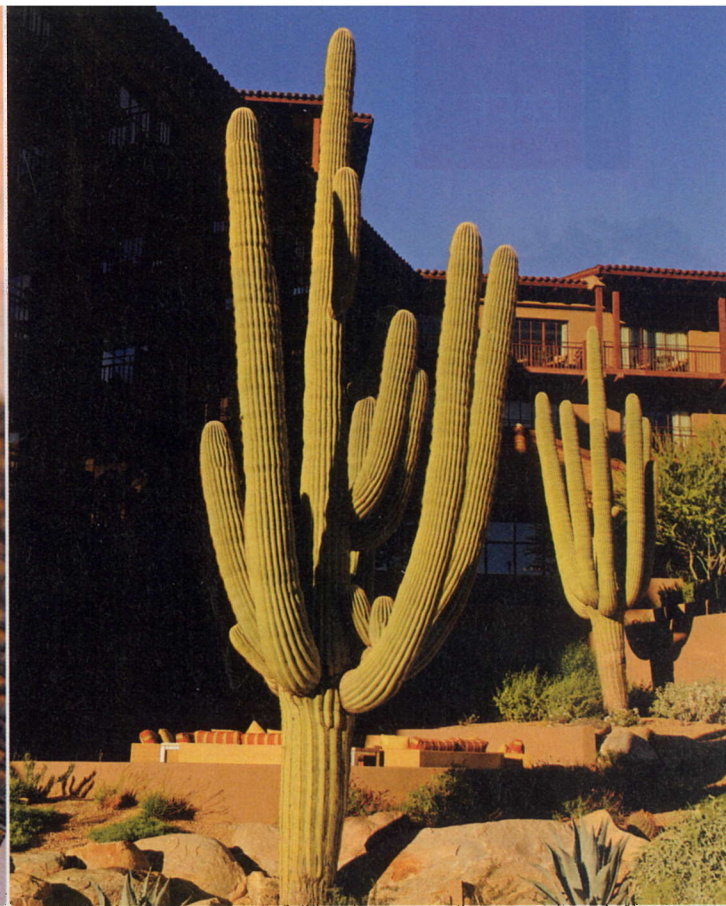
The Saguaro and Tortolita, in that order, are used for the tournament 18. As good as they are, the Wild Burro nine gets local votes as the favorite, probably because it was designed with the resort guest in mind. A fourth nine has been routed, but it was put on hold until the economy recovers. You won't be bored playing any combination of the three nines multiple times throughout your visit. I'd also caution not to hunt for lost balls: Wildlife is wild in the high desert—I came uncomfortably close to a bobcat—and the razor-sharp vegetation isn't exactly tame.

**LOCAL KNOWLEDGE**

**TRAIL MIX** The Ritz at Dove Mountain offers 20-plus miles of trails throughout the Tortolita Mountains, which can be enjoyed by foot, bike, horseback and eco-jeep tours. In the "Astronomy Capital of the World," don't forget to look up at night.

**TREASURE CHEST** From Jan. 29 to Feb. 13, Tucson has the largest gem show in the world. At 50 locations around town, from tents to hotels, more than 250 mineral, gemstone, jewelry and fossil retailers showcase their impressive collections.

**'A' MARKS THE SPOT** You can't miss Sentinel Peak. To celebrate a win in 1914, the University of Arizona football team white-washed a giant A (70 feet by 160 feet) into the side of the hill. The popular lookout spot is the site of a Fourth of July fireworks show.



Churros are served with lots of sauce; two cacti that caused a design dilemma.

If lost balls get you down, then lose yourself in the resort's amenities. The 17,000-square-foot spa is off the west wing of the main hotel (room rates start at \$349 in the winter), and it features indoor and outdoor treatment rooms, a serenity pool and a private courtyard with a fireplace. The main pool and hot tub—near the 235-foot waterslide and just below the rocks where the Native American flute player captivates assembled guests every evening at sunset—is an ideal spot for drinks, relaxation and reflections on the good life. I watched baseball's Fall Classic on a flatscreen while drinking cold beers and eating baby-back ribs at Cayton's outdoor patio, which overlooks portions of the course. Of all the delicious desserts, I suggest treating yourself to the warm churros, served with coffee, chocolate and raspberry sauces.

MAP: KAGAN MCLEOD & JONATHAN RIVAIT

It was hard to leave the understated elegance and excellent service of such a secluded setting, which is 30 minutes north of the Tucson airport, but I did break away for a round at the Omni Tucson National. The Catalina course was the former host of the Tucson Open, but it was being overseeded when I was in town. I played the Sonoran Course (\$188, Jan. 1 through April 4), which was renovated by Tom Lehman in 2005. I enjoyed the views of the Catalina Mountains and the middle stretch of the course, which was flat and free of any houses neighboring the fairways. I played it from 6,529 yards, which seems short for a back set of tees, but it's a par 70 with severe undulation changes at the beginning and the end of the round. The slope up to the 515-yard 15th is so steep the course had to make the flagstick 25 feet tall so you can see it from the fairway. Have fun tending that

#### COURSE GUIDE



1 **Ritz-Carlton at Dove Mountain** (not yet rated) dovemountain.com, 520-572-8000

2 **Tucson National G.C. (Sonoran)** ★★☆☆½ tucsonnational.com, 800-528-4856

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one for your playing partner.

Located 60 miles north of the Mexico border, Tucson is the second-largest city in Arizona, behind Phoenix. Tucson can be traced back 2,000 years, to the Hohokom Indians, who used to live and farm along what is now a mostly dry bed of the Santa Cruz River. The University of Arizona, with

40,000 students, drives much of the local industry and employment. Downtown Tucson is in need of a face-lift, and lots of the area's old courses and resorts are struggling.

The Ritz, which was off to a slow start, recently got a new partner in Ray Sidney, a 40-year-old software engineer-turned-philanthropist. Sydney, Google's third employee, is not sweating the loss of a \$50 million investment. His contribution to the resort hasn't been disclosed, but it has been reported in local newspapers that he paid off the company's debt, which allowed the real-estate side of the business to lower property prices, stimulating some sales.

Sidney might seem like an unlikely savior for a Tucson golf resort. But then again, Dove Mountain has already proved it's comfortable with the clash of old and new. —MIG

For more stories and images of Matt Ginella's life on the road, visit [golfdigest.com/golf-courses/blogs/wheres-matty-g](http://golfdigest.com/golf-courses/blogs/wheres-matty-g).