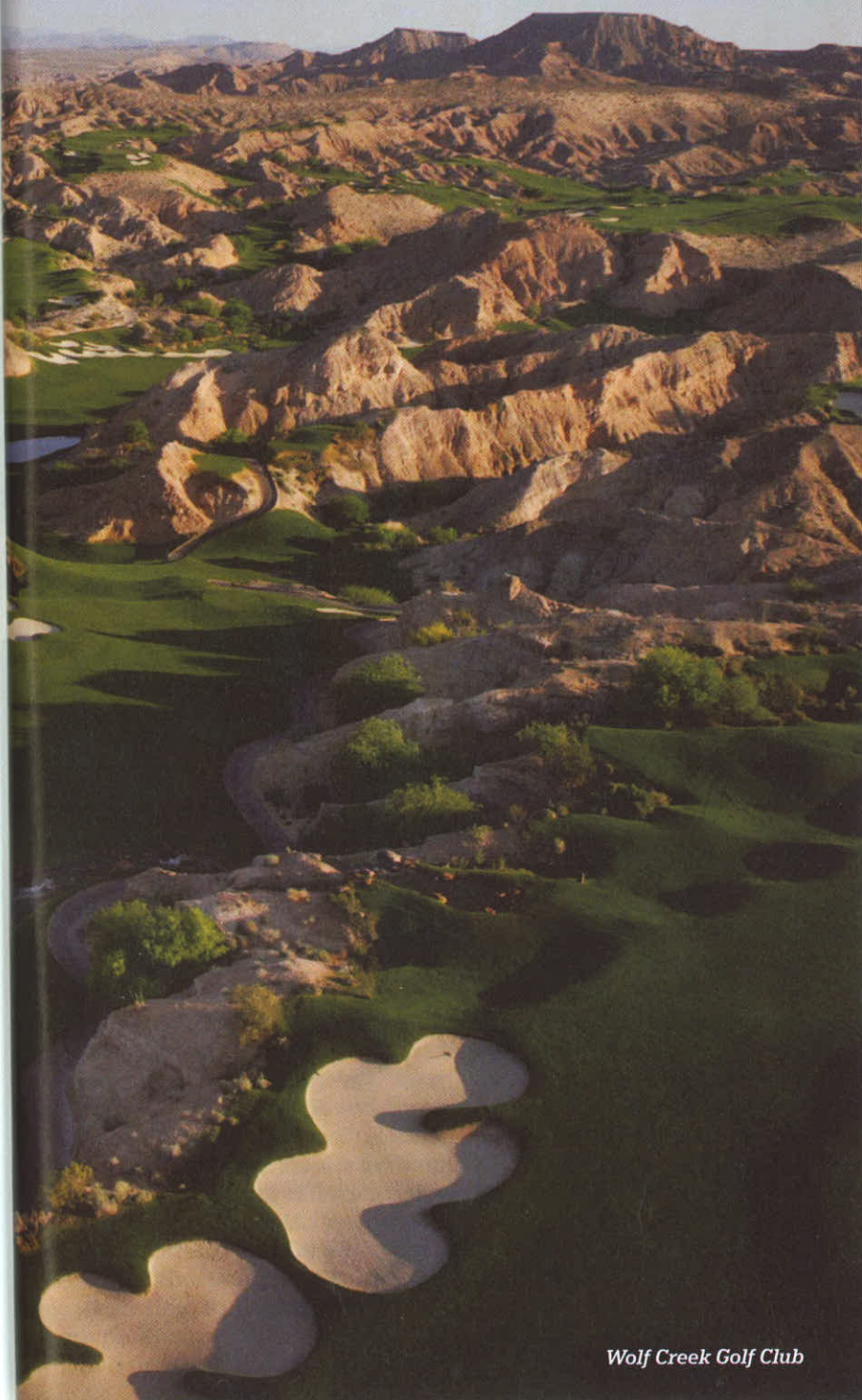


Vegas lite



COURTESY OF WOLF CREEK GOLF CLUB

A DRAMATIC GOLF LANDSCAPE AND VALUE PRICING HELP PUT REMOTE MESQUITE ON THE MAP



Wolf Creek Golf Club

By **Martin Kaufmann**

Mesquite, Nev.

Mesquite comes upon you less like an oasis in the desert, slowly forming in the distance, than a thunderclap, sudden and unexpected.

One moment you're busting 85 mph on Interstate 15, just past the mesa with the big "V" indicating you've arrived in the Virgin Valley, and a split-second later the CasaBlanca Resort and Casino pops up on the skyline by Exit 120 like a genie summoned from a bottle – so fast that a first-timer will find himself quickly pumping the brakes. By Exit 122, Mesquite is in your rear-view mirror and you're bearing down on the Arizona state line. Shoehorned within those two miles are 20,000 residents, 126 golf holes and three casinos.

If Las Vegas is analogous to a giant mall, packed with all of the major department stores, specialty retailers and entertainment options, Mesquite is the outlet mall that entices a steady stream of cars to pull off the highway. To carry the analogy further, Mesquite has all of the major brands that you'll find in Vegas – the top-ranked courses, the casinos and sports books – but there are fewer frills and plenty of bargains lining the shelves. The casino floors are much smaller, the rooms comfortable but not extravagant, the restaurant choices slimmer and less flashy – though the table-side presentation of the flaming spinach salad at Katherine's, CasaBlanca's signature steakhouse, has a certain showmanship that would play well on the Strip.

The terrain in this part of the country, on the northern end of what is known as the Basin and Range Province, long ago was compared to "an army of caterpillars marching toward Mexico." It is characterized by the juxtaposition of sharply contrasting land forms – short ranges jutting up around flat valley basins – that fascinates geologists, but also helps explain why golfers travel great distances to play here. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that golfers will see sights in Mesquite that will linger with them long after they've returned home.

Nowhere is that more true than at Wolf Creek Golf Club. Golfers go to Mesquite to see Wolf Creek, just as tourists go to New York for Ellis

Mesquite, P52 >>>

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<<< Mesquite, P51

Island or Rome to see Vatican City. There are a lot of other attractions in each city, but there are some things you just have to see for yourself.

"Take your camera. You won't believe it," said Dave, a local codger whom I had joined for a morning round at Falcon Ridge.

This is something of a running joke for Joel Villanos, the Wolf Creek general manager who sometimes teases first-timers that he starts charging after the first three photos. Villanos is so smitten that for nine years he has been making the 160-mile round-trip commute to Wolf Creek from his home in Las Vegas.

What Pebble Beach and Bandon Dunes Resort do for seaside golf, Wolf Creek does for desert golf. It shows the art form at its finest, all the while leaving you with one stunning vista after another. There are surreal moments, such as when you're standing more than 11 stories above the valley floor on the second tee, looking out over the enormous sand mounds, that you might feel like a character in one of painter Loyal H. Chapman's "Infamous Golf Holes" series. But logically and aesthetically, it all works.

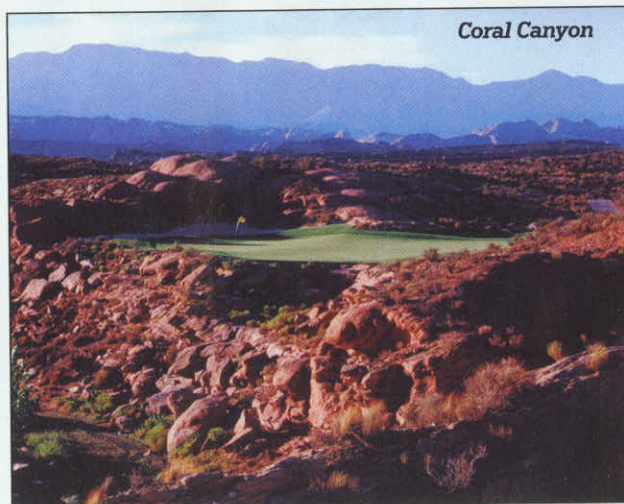
When players arrive at the first tee, the starter hands each a yardage book and a waiver to sign, the latter a reminder that the steep and winding cart paths can be hairy. Though Wolf Creek's slope from the back tees is a seemingly inhospitable 154, you'll



probably walk away more exhilarated than exhausted. That speaks to the brilliance of the layout: It has many hazards, but it also has pacing, thanks to a bunch of relatively easy pars and even some birdie opportunities to bolster your spirits.

Golf got its start in Mesquite 21 years ago with the opening of Palms Golf Club, a course with a split personality. The Palms' front and back sides have as much in common as Barack Obama and Sarah Palin. (We'll leave it to others to decide whether the thoroughly entertaining backside leans Democrat or Republican.) If the front whispers "Florida retirement community," the back screams "rock 'n' roll," starting with a blind tee shot on No. 10 before repeatedly plunging in and out of the valley.

When the Re/Max World Long Drive Championship first came to Mesquite (elevation 1,600), it was held at the Palms. Across town at the CasaBlanca Golf Club, not far from the casino, there's a plaque on the first tee marking the point from which Canadian bomber Jason Zuback in



1997 drove the ball 412 yards, clean over the first green on the fly.

The town's commitment to golf was solidified 10 years ago with the formation of Golf Mesquite, which markets the courses and books travel. The independent cooperative represents six courses in town – Wolf Creek no longer participates – and three headliners near town. For those arriving via Las Vegas, Coyote Springs, originally envisioned as the western home of the PGA of America before the housing bust slammed the brakes on that project, is a convenient pit stop on the way to or from Mesquite. Two courses from St. George, Utah, a 45-minute drive up I-15, also



participate: Coral Canyon and Sand Hollow, the latter a recent *Golfweek* cover girl thanks to its photogenic canyon-side setting. Both St. George courses occupy stunning land not far from the Zion National Park and the snow-capped Pine Valley Mountains. If you throw in Wolf Creek, visitors get four of the top 12 *Golfweek's* Best public-access courses in Nevada and two of the top three in Utah.

A good indicator of the Mesquite clientele can be found in the succession of toe-tapping '70s songs that compete with the din of chiming one-armed bandits at the Eureka Casino. They're people such

as my two fiftysomething playing partners at Wolf Creek – one from Pittsburgh, the other from near San Francisco – who were part of a 20-man group spending three 36-hole days in Mesquite. They probably drove less than 10 miles during their stay, yet saw different courses each day.

Their itinerary included Conestoga Golf Club, the newest addition to Mesquite's golf portfolio. It's open to the public, but part of a Del Webb retirement community – ironic given that it shares some of Wolf Creek's heart-thumping appeal.

Conestoga's front side is a rollicking exercise in target golf played,

for the most part, through a canyon and across arroyos before opening up to a more conventional desert golf experience on the back. In a perfect world, the nines would be flipped – awkward, perhaps, because No. 10 is a par 3 – with the most memorable holes late in the round.

As we enjoyed Conestoga's front side, my playing partner noted the geological theory that all of this land was covered by ocean millions of years ago. It certainly seems possible; when you play golf in Mesquite, there are times when the land doesn't look like anything you've ever seen above sea level.