

Hot Springs Golf

By: ROLAND MERULLO, Contributing Writer, GOLF MAGAZINE | Published: Friday, December 15, 2006 | 09:47:00 AM

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Hot Springs Village Cortez's 17th

Long before Hot Springs, Arkansas, became the childhood home of the mulligan-loving 42nd president (Bill Clinton lived in Hope for just a time as a boy, but the town sounded good in speeches) it was renowned for its healing waters, which earned national-park status in 1921. It was also a literal stamping ground of 16th-century explorer Hernando DeSoto, whose army, like a violent precursor to the Hooters Tour, roared across the Southeast in search of treasure.

DeSoto lives on here: His name adorns one of seven courses within Hot Springs Village, the country's largest gated community, where you'll find topnotch golf without the whirlwind of activity and hefty prices typical at many resorts.

Hot Springs Village, 65 miles southwest of Little Rock, offers high quality without pretentiousness. Visiting golfers must stay in the village to play -- unless they're guests of members -- but it's still a good deal: HSV (in local shorthand) could easily command more than the going rate of \$70 per night for a comfortable condo or \$250 for a six-bedroom lakefront pad.

The Village sits on old Weyerhaeuser Company land and it seems that any time timber prices fell, another piece of property was sold off, usually to John A. Cooper, who founded this 26,000-acre community in 1970. The names of all seven courses -- an eighth track, the Granada, is expected to open on Labor Day -- reflect the historic Spanish influence here.

The most popular HSV layout is Isabella, named for the queen who financed the travels of Columbus, which opened in 2000. You'd better hope the huge cloverleaf bunker that greets you at the 541-yard 1st hole is a harbinger of good luck. Architect Tom Clark's 7,061-yard design constantly throws you off balance by making full use of the lively central-Arkansas topography. There's a perfect example at the 17th: You may forget it's just a downhill 164-yarder when you see a pond shielding a green perched atop a wall of native black shale. Behind this two-tiered dance floor is a pair of mean bunkers; find them and you're staring back at the water with a sand wedge in hand. It's a tough par and an unlikely birdie. Things don't get much easier at the closing hole, a bruising par 4 of 461 yards.

There's water all over the 6,600-yard Magellan course, and it's not nearly as soothing as the hot springs. Big hitters will be tempted to attack the 308-yard 12th, but a lake extends along the gathering edge of a left-sloping fairway. The rest of us will lay up short of bottlenecking bunkers and leave a short pitch to a green backed by a stand of hickories and grassy pot bunkers.



Hot Springs Village
Isabella's 8th

The Ponce de Leon track (6,946 yards) can bait you into expeditions as foolhardy as those undertaken by the explorer himself. Like the uphill approach shot to the 367-yard 14th: Two cavernous bunkers front the green on either side while tight behind is a steep hill. Standing in the fairway below, the temptation is to bounce your ball off the slope like it's a backboard. Try it and you'll stay up there for a very tough chip shot.

The Cortez course (6,610 yards) boasts HSV's most impressive nine holes with its challenging back side. Swaddled in hickory, oak and pine, the nine opens with the toughest hole at the resort: a 434-yard dogleg-right with a milk-bone-thin landing area. The 17th is a terrific 177-yarder that plays hard downhill. From the tee, you see the peaks of the Ozarks, and you'll feel like a Tour player hitting a short iron on this midlength par 3.

The other courses provide an enjoyable trek. The Balboa (6,831 yards) is a wide-open pleasure track that gives more than it takes. The DeSoto, HSV's original course, opened in 1972 and was renovated in 2001 by Clark, who added grass and sand bunkers to turn a drab layout into a

strategic challenge. The Coronado course is a par-62 executive layout that might pass for an evening stroll.

The village resort is 15 miles north of downtown Hot Springs. Here you can spend more time investigating Bubba than Ken Starr did by following the Historic Clinton Hometown Tour. Among the attractions are young Bill's childhood homes, the site of his prom, the lanes where he bowled, even the spot where he inhaled his favorite ice cream. Top it all off with Bill and Hil in the Josephine Tussaud Wax Museum, where the former first couple stand near Neil Armstrong and Jesus -- neither of whom, it should be noted, is an Arkansas native.

The town's top dining option is the splendid Belle Arti on the main strip of Central Avenue. For a dining experience more Southern than Southern Italian, try dinner aboard the Belle of Hot Springs, a riverboat that cruises Lake Hamilton with the Ouachita Mountains as scenic backdrop.

Life in this corner of Arkansas is sedate, with golf at Hot Springs Village as lively as it gets. Still, this month the annual Mudder Muckers ATV Jamboree takes place nearby. But I'd rather play 36 holes, then slip into the springs for a calming soak (see sidebar). If the golf had been this good when DeSoto rampaged through here, he might never have left. More Hot Springs Golf

Hot Springs Village

Greens fees \$38-\$59 (Isabella, Granada); \$17-\$27 (Coronado); \$27-\$46 (all other courses)

800-478-8846; hsvgolf.com

For more information on the surrounding area go to hotsprings.org.

Opened in 1994, Glenwood Country Club is an enjoyable 6,550-yard layout designed by Bobby McGee on rolling terrain 30 minutes southwest of Hot Springs and known for a strong set of par 3s. Greens fees \$21-\$29; 800-833-3110; glenwoodcountryclub.com.

Hot Springs Country Club was founded in 1898. The 6,836-yard Majestic Course was designed by Willie Park Jr.; the 6,690-yard Arlington Course was renovated in 1995 by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore. Access is available for guests of two Hot Springs retreats, the Majestic Hotel (themajestichotel.com; 800-643-1504) and the Arlington Resort Hotel & Spa (arlingtonhotel.com; 800-643-1502). Greens fee: \$63. Get in Hot Water

Rival Native American tribes decided centuries ago to create a neutral zone around Hot Springs' soothing thermal pools. For many years since, people have come to the Ouachita Valley in search of healing and relaxation. You can take a tour of the elegantly tiled rooms at Fordyce Bathhouse and Visitor Center. Buckstaff Bathhouse is the only continuously operated thermal bath left on historic Bath House Row. The service is just as good up the street at the Arlington, where the same spring waters are piped into the spa.