



The Grass Is Always Greener – in the Desert

Golf Special

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If you're on a winning streak, Arizona is the destination for you. You can try your luck at several American Indian reservations near Phoenix—on the golf course by day and in the casinos by night. Join us for an unforgettable experience as we visit the We-Ko-Pa Golf Club—a golfers' paradise in the middle of the desert.





The roughly one thousand members of the Yavapai-Apache Nation living on the Fort McDowell reservation near Phoenix, Arizona, are a proud people and not averse to a bit of friendly competition. And indeed, visitors flock here to indulge in two highly competitive and exciting pastimes that are not as different as they may seem—gambling and golf. After all, as far as most are concerned, golf could be called a form of gambling, though in this game you play eighteen holes before *rien ne va plus*—and it's perhaps more beneficial to your health than sitting in a casino for hours.

In the casino, cash is at stake, while on the green it's "merely" honor, at least as far as the players are concerned. The Yavapai-Apache have invested a lot of money to build two truly spectacular golf courses. They hired none other than Scott Miller, one of the world's premier golf course architects and a former senior designer for golf legend Jack Nicklaus. Miller's assignment was simple, and can be paraphrased in two short sentences: "Here are 700 acres of land. Go out and build the most beautiful golf course you can."

Miller obliged, and for the Cholla course at We-Ko-Pa, which means "four-mountain-peak," he pulled out all the stops. Tons of fine-grained sand surround the imposing saguaro cacti; picturesque towers of rock artfully flank the fairways; wildly contoured, undulating greens tease players by disappearing into charming canyonettes. Miller's genius, combined with the striking setting, make this eighteen-hole course a true desert gem. Visitors are in for an unforgettable golfing experience. Each time you tee off, it is before a spectacular backdrop of the surrounding mountains. None of the usual fences, not a house, no concrete in sight anywhere—nothing but magnificent, pristine countryside and silence all around. ▶

Golfing scene: The sky's blue and the mountains' gray set off the course's verdant hues and make for a "game with a view"

The golfing world has responded with enthusiasm bordering on wonder. “Out there, it’s just you and the course, there’s nothing that detracts from the views or the authenticity of the moment,” reads one player’s awed entry in the guestbook. The August *Wall Street Journal* described the course as “untainted by civilization.” *The Washington Post*, too, was unusually reverent: “These greens are sacred to both the Native Americans and golfers.”

A light breeze cools my perspiring brow with marvelously dry air, and the sticky Florida heat is so wonderfully far away. The desert as paradise—just one of the paradoxes of the world of golf. A few inches from the soft carpet of grass under my feet, there’s nothing but wilderness in its purest form: rocks, gravel, scrub, sand, cacti. If a ball takes a turn for the desert, it’s better to just write it off. First of all, there are the dangers of clambering around on loose terrain, not to mention the rattlesnakes that we’re warned of by occasional signs at the edge of the greens. And second, you’re unlikely to find it, anyway. Better to apply the “desert rule.” After hitting a ball into the desert, a player is allowed to drop a new ball within two club-lengths of where the ball crossed the line—at a cost of one penalty shot added to your score. A piece of advice: Take plenty of balls, because the desert will gobble them up faster than you might think.

As if Cholla weren’t enough, the We-Ko-Pa resort has upped the ante. It added another eighteen holes last December, and *Golf Magazine* promptly awarded the new Saguaro course a spot in its list of the ten best golf courses in the world. A five-star hotel will soon follow. But not to worry, the We-Ko-Pa will lose none of its charm: the plans call for it to be seamlessly integrated into its surroundings. Skeptical? For proof that this feat can be performed, you need look no further than the resort’s clubhouse. It has the dimensions of a sizable hospital, yet it is unobtrusively nestled into the terrain, resembling an elegant molehill flanked by terraces and open fireplaces. ▶

Danger zone: If you miss the fairway, it’s best to write off your ball; if you venture out into the wild, you might step on a rattlesnake



Environmentally friendly: The We-Ko-Pa clubhouse blends in with its surroundings

Besides the Yavapai, three other Arizona tribes based within driving distance of Phoenix operate upscale golf courses on reservation lands. They all offer several advantages over the 150-plus other courses in the Valley of the Sun: a visit to remote, largely undeveloped land that surrounds greater Phoenix; a chance to absorb some of the tribes’ cultural ethos; and, thanks to favorable tribal economics, courses with vistas undisturbed by the green-side real estate that balances the books of most fancy golf courses these days. The usual course of events can be summed up as follows: A spectacular course is carved out of pristine countryside; as many curious golfers as possible are lured there due to its novelty value and hype; everything around it is gradually covered with concrete—and ultimately you’re not playing golf in the desert, but in a desert city, which is a big difference.

“That will never happen here,” promises Raphael Baer, spokesperson for the Yavapai-Apache nation. No construction will be allowed near the courses, so that not a single building can mar the view, ever. In return, the tribe asks only that course employees be hired from the ranks of its members whenever possible.

Has all this talk of unspoiled vistas made you want to catch the next flight to Phoenix for a golfing getaway? No problem. Just keep in mind that the season lasts from October to April. And take enough cash. Of course, credit cards will do, too, but one thing is for sure: golfing in the wilderness is one pleasure that doesn’t come cheap. A round at the We-Ko-Pa will run you between \$135–\$195.

If you’re in the area, check out one of the other impressive golf clubs run by American Indian communities, such as the Whirlwind on the Gila River Indian Community or the Talking Stick located on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Nation, which features two challenging eighteen-hole courses.

Either way, you can stay at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa on the Gila River Indian Community. A night here during the season will run you \$398 (\$119 in the summer)—not exactly cheap, either, but worth it. The Maricopa and Pima invested \$175 million in the Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa, which includes golf grounds, horseback riding facilities, and a luxury spa ▶

The We-Ko-Pa Golf Club

The club is located in the unspoiled countryside east of Scottsdale and Fountain Hills, near Phoenix. It features two eighteen-hole courses and a practice range. For further information or to make reservations, see the Website:

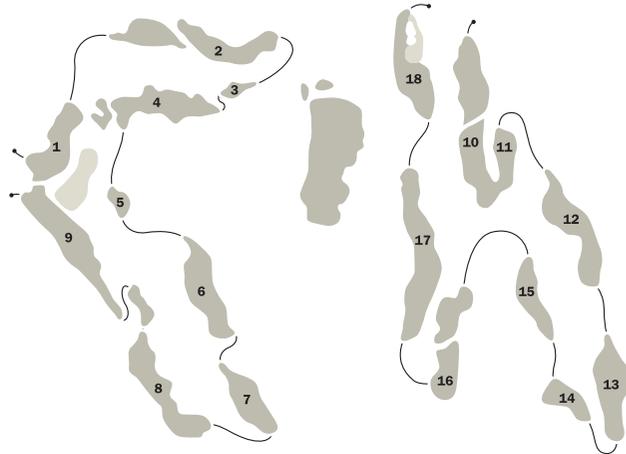
www.wekopa.com



The Courses

1. The Cholla Course

An eighteen-hole course designed by Scott Miller



2. The Saguaro Course

Ranked among the top ten in the world by *Golf Magazine*



in addition to the 500-room hotel. However, this is no ordinary cookie-cutter hotel, but rather a convincing synthesis of modern comfort and American Indian heritage. The entrance faces east, as tradition demands; every vase, each chest, each rug, and each bowl here has received official approval from the tribal cultural committee. American Indian flute music plays softly in the lobby. The entire resort resembles a gigantic pueblo. At the spa, the signature Blue Coyote Wrap dips into legend and will practically have you floating back to your room.

Should you get tired of golfing and being pampered, don't forget there's another benefit exclusive to the resorts run by local tribes: you can gamble all night long. As the marketing manager of one of the casinos tells us, "More and more of our guests see the golf course as an added attraction." Some players might say it's the other way around.