

New Mexico's golf courses primed for fall



HIDE CAPTION ^

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New Mexico golf

(Montana Pritchard, The PGA of America)

A scenic view of hole 15 at Twin Warriors Golf Club in Santa Ana Pueblo, New Mexico

By Dan Vukelich, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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A hot-air balloon, yellow and red and as big as a house, just cleared the treetops, then descended onto the golf course with a series of urgent "wooshes" from its propane burner.

The wicker gondola bounced and bumped along the fairway for about 10 yards, then tipped over, awkwardly, the envelope dragging it and the balloon's three occupants until it stopped in front of the eighth green of the University of New Mexico North golf course.

My playing partner was in awe. Me? All I saw was a colossal distraction between me and my ball, which I'd just hit to about 15 feet from the flag.

A flag-festooned chase vehicle arrived. Out of the truck spilled the chase crew. Laughing and shouting apologies, they quickly deflated the balloon's envelope. We waved. They waved. Then they packed up and drove off, laughing. A happy, well-lubricated bunch for 9 a.m. on a Sunday, I thought. Sadly, I missed my birdie putt.

For nine days each October, that scene is repeated on golf courses and in alfalfa fields, bean fields and vacant lots across Albuquerque — any space that's large enough to allow a balloon to land.

Balloonists come to Albuquerque in the fall for the same reason golfers do. The mornings start brisk, then warm quickly. There's plenty of sunshine, and winds are generally light. In a good year I can play golf in shorts and shirt sleeves through Thanksgiving. And because we're a mile above sea level, golf balls here travel about 12 percent farther in the thin, dry air.

The August monsoons were good to New Mexico this year, meaning the state's 68 golf courses are in their best shape in a decade. Here are some picks for quality golf in New Mexico.

Albuquerque area

Paa-Ko Ridge Golf Club — Perennially recognized in the two top national golf magazines' Top 100 lists, Paa-Ko was carved by designer Ken Dye through a hilly pinon and juniper forest. No two holes are alike, which means you can vividly replay your round in your mind's eye — the mark of a truly great golf course. (505-281-6000, paakoridge.com)

Sandia Golf Club — Sandia Pueblo's hotel-casino and its golf course, designed by Scott Miller (We-Ko-Pa Cholla Course, Coeur d'Alene Resort), is just across Interstate Highway 25 from the balloon fiesta's launch field. Twelve of Sandia's 18 holes play toward 10,600-foot-high Sandia Peak, which defines Albuquerque's eastern border. The course's forgiving resort design gives high-handicap players a fighting chance at finding errant shots, but the greens can be merciless. Goodies from the Sandia turn house and beverage cart are renowned for fare that can make foodies drool. (505-798-3990, sandiegolf.com)

Santa Ana Golf Club — This 27-hole Ken Killian-designed, daily-fee property would rank as the top daily-fee course in almost any U.S. city, but the friendliness of Santa Ana's staff makes it No. 1 in service locally. On the property is the Prairie Star Restaurant and Wine Bar, acclaimed for its wine cellar and its New Mexican interpretation of continental cuisine. The course's Wind Dancer Bar & Grill has a comfortable patio to let you soak in views of Sandia Peak, which turns watermelon red as the sun goes down. (505-867-9464, mynewmexicogolf.com)

Twin Warriors Golf Club — The sister course to Santa Ana, Twin Warriors, designed by Arizona architect Gary Panks (Grayhawk Golf Club Talon Course), is a 7,500-yard modified desert-links design that has hosted the national championship for PGA of America club pros. It's the on-property amenity to the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort & Spa, which offers horseback riding, three outdoor heated swimming pools, tennis, Native American-themed restaurants and spa treatments, and hiking and biking through the cottonwood forest lining the nearby Rio Grande. (505-771-6155, mynewmexicogolf.com)

University of New Mexico Championship Golf Course (not the North course) — Red Lawrence (The Wigwam, Desert Forest) built this hilly test in 1966. It has hosted NCAA Division 1 Men's and Women's national golf championships. UNM is only a 7-iron away from the Albuquerque airport rental-car center, which makes it ideal for your first or last round. (505-277-4546, unmgolf.com)

Cochiti Golf Club — In 1981, Robert Trent Jones Jr. cut this target-style course through spectacular red rock canyons on Cochiti Pueblo, midway between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. There are no houses or highways near the course, and no sounds except the wind in the trees and the crack of your golf shot. (505-465-2230, cochitigolfclub.com)

Santa Fe area

Marty Sanchez Links de Santa Fe — This city-owned, modified desert-links course designed by Baxter

Spann is just 15 minutes west of the Santa Fe Plaza city square. It offers a last-minute alternative to gallery crawling or shopping. (505-955-4400, linksdesantafe.com)

Towa Golf Club — Built on Pojoaque Pueblo land north of Santa Fe on the road to Espanola, Towa's three nines, designed by Hale Irwin and William Phillips, run through valleys on either side of a boulder-strewn ridge. Towa is an amenity of the Santa Fe Hilton Buffalo Thunder Resort & Casino. It offers instruction through the Hilton Golf Academy. (505-455-9000, buffalothunderresort.com)

Black Mesa Golf Club — North of Santa Fe, Spann's design on Santa Clara Pueblo land near Espanola is ranked on the national magazines' Top 100 lists. Spann's use of the existing terrain is a monument to minimalism. Had you walked the desert before construction, you could see where the holes would go, including a dramatic par 3 set in a natural rock amphitheater. (505-747-8946, blackmesagolfclub.com)

Also

Worth the drive north from Santa Fe: Taos Country Club in Taos; Angel Fire Resort Country Club in Angel Fire; Pinon Hills Golf Course in Farmington, N.M., once labeled by Golf Digest as the best U.S. municipal golf value.

Worth the drive south from Albuquerque: New Mexico Tech Golf Course in Socorro and Inn of the Mountain Gods near Ruidoso. Built in 1975 by Ted Robinson on the Mescalero Apache reservation, the inn claims the title of the first Native American-owned golf enterprise in the United States.

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If you go

Getting there: Most of the major airlines fly to Albuquerque. United Airlines flies to Santa Fe from Denver, and American Airlines flies to Santa Fe from Los Angeles and Dallas.

Course prices: The most you'll pay is \$117 at Paa-Ko Ridge for a peak-time weekend round, cart included. Most of the other top courses come in generally in the \$60 to \$80 range, cart included. The steal in the whole region is Black Mesa, which costs \$46 on weekends, cart included.

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