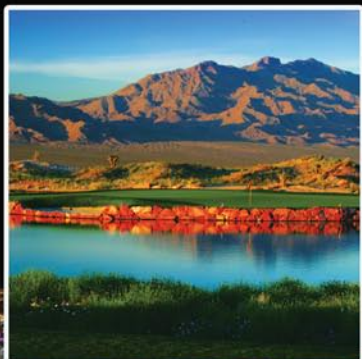


GOLF LAS VEGAS

The Ultimate Guide

KEN VAN VECHTEN



“With many of my more famous colleagues having taken a stab at their rendition of golf design ‘Vegas-style,’ a virtual playground awaits the traveling golfer. And from a city chock full of exploding volcanoes, 100-foot-tall dancing fountains, and pirates squaring off in battle with Sirens, don’t expect anything less from the area’s golf courses.

“Las Vegas is a town that’s as good at spin as it is at sin, and Ken Van Vechten’s unbiased and unsolicited guide provides a fresh perspective on southern Nevada’s golf courses and all they have to offer ... or not offer. Whether you’re looking for extravagance or value, great design or just an overall great experience, *Golf Las Vegas* will get you ‘rolling’ in the right direction.”

—David B. Druzisky, golf course architect

“Forget spending hours and hours trying to research places to stay and play in Vegas. You’ll drive yourself (and your wife) crazy. Besides, Ken Van Vechten’s already done all the work for you. If you’re planning a trip here to play golf or if you are a resident, you’ve got everything you need in your hands right now, except a tee time. If you’re coming to Vegas, this is the book you need to read *before* you get here. You’ll save money, time, and most importantly, your sanity.”

—Bill Bowman, Editor, *VegasGolfer* magazine

“Vegas thrives on bombast, artifice, and hype, and that applies to its golf product, too. But in his quest to present Vegas golf in the most informative light, Ken Van Vechten strips away the veneer to give an honest, incisive, thorough—and thoroughly entertaining—guide to getting the most out of a Sin City swing. There’s a reason we load him up with Vegas assignments: He knows his stuff, from the Strip to Laughlin, the mega-hotels to the tasty chow spots.”

—Vic Williams, Executive Editor,
Fairways + Greens magazine

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Huntington Press

Las Vegas, Nevada

INTRODUCTION

On The Range

Las Vegas first dabbled with the old Scottish game in 1927 when a gravel and sand track was scratched into terra firma in the vicinity of today's Las Vegas Hilton. How that course differed from the hardscrabble native desert is hard to imagine, but golf in Sin City was born, perhaps prematurely.

If the course had a name, it appears to have gone the way of the mashie niblick. I think of it as Creosote National Golf Club. San Francisco had the Olympic Club. Los Angeles sported Riviera and Bel-Air. New York was on the way to cornering the market on blue-chip golf and even sleepy little Palm Springs had a grass course. Las Vegas had CNGC, and it didn't sit well with local leaders. The *Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal* railed against the civic disgrace, stating in an October 20, 1936, editorial, "Visitors here are astounded that such a progressive and active city as Las Vegas is without such [adequate golf] facilities."

Salvation—ironically, if you know anything about Nevada's love-hate relationship with Washington, D.C.—appeared shortly thereafter thanks to the federal government, in the form of a real grass course largely funded by the Works Progress Administration.

Save the mid-1930s' appearance of that WPA Hoover Dam

project offshoot and the mid-1940s' arrival of Las Vegas Golf Club, not much seed was sown until the 1950s and particularly the 1960s. Call it the classic era or the Mob high times or the pre-Tiger boomlet, but golf courses followed casinos both on and off the Strip. By 1969 Sin City reputedly boasted 13 golf facilities, prompting a quaint nearly lost-to-time guidebook to amusingly and certainly not accurately declare Las Vegas the top dog in the world of golf. That vision notwithstanding, Las Vegas remained dedicated to other activities and the playing of the game was an afterthought, a leisure pursuit to be worked around the headier undertakings of gambling, sunning, womanizing, and imbibing, and any "golf capital" title would have to be earned.

Palm Springs receives one-tenth Las Vegas' visitors and boasts more than twice as many golf courses. Scottsdale drapes a new track across the Sonoran Desert on seemingly a weekly basis. A few clubs in Florida boast membership rosters that would go a long way toward filling the field at the Tour Championship. Yet Las Vegas has arrived, in a golfing sense, and players can now challenge the likes of Nicklaus, Dye, Fazio, and Weiskopf, in addition to Lady Luck. Sin City is a bona fide golf destination, with a few unique perks thrown in.

About the Book

Golf Las Vegas: The Ultimate Guide is essentially a travelogue, a narrative romp through Sin City golfdom that's put together as a how-to guidebook. I've been playing golf, a lot of golf, in Vegas—and Mesquite and Pahrump and Primm and Laughlin—for the past eight or nine years and along the way I started taking note of what I was playing and experiencing. What rolls out after all that is the tallying of all those figurative scorecards.

Golf Las Vegas opens at the point where they hand out the green jacket at Augusta: The tourney is in the record books and the new champion is feted. Only in this case, the honor being bestowed is recognition of southern Nevada's must-play golf courses, even if

they're in Arizona or California. The selections run from a couple of the \$500/round behemoths to a time-honored low-cost muni out by Hoover Dam. I've also tossed in my choice for where I most like to stay during a Vegas golf getaway.

Just as you (should) get to the course early to prepare for the round ahead—stretch, chip and putt, beat some balls, grab a cup of coffee or Screwdriver depending on the previous night's activities—Chapter 2 is a warm-up session. It's all about how to get ready for a Las Vegas golf getaway. Informative rather than minutely exhaustive, this part of the book is about planning and enjoying a Vegas golf vacation.

Chapter 3 (“Bunking Down”) and Chapter 4 (“For Whom the Chow Bell Tolls”) are the Vegas-vacation parts of the book. Here you'll find my picks for where to bunk and eat when you decide to get off the course. The reasons for my choices will be apparent when you get there; suffice it to say that, as with the notable course nominees, the selections are varied.

Chapter 5 (“The Scorecard”) is where you'll find the quick-and-easy lowdown about each course: location, phone number, Web address, course yardage and USGA ratings, course designer(s), the dope on rental clubs, and perhaps the three most important items: green fee, nutshell course review, and an Eagle/Birdie/Par/Bogey/Snowman rating system as to whether you should spend your time and your dollars playing the course (in terms of Vegas dollars, not the type in which Bandon Dunes often costs about the same as Desert Pines). Every “Eagle” or “Birdie” might not necessarily come with a tuition-sized green fee and a few in the black numbers might raise some eyebrows. And on this course, par is a good score.

If I can get back to the Augusta National references, Chapter 6 (“On The Course”) is the Amen Corner of *Golf Las Vegas*, the very heart of the course, only in this case we play through 57 course reviews rather than sitting glued to the tube sweating whether Couples' ball really is going to hold on the bank that never holds a ball. Courses are listed alphabetically regardless of locale (Mesquite, Primm, Vegas, etc.).

I don't write standard take-em-from-the-first-tee-through-the-18th-green course reviews, because I hate course reviews that read like actuaries spitting risk statistics sans emotion or pausing for breath. If you need hole-by-hole yardages, look at the scorecard. If you want a swing-by-swing recitation of some guy hacking around a course, pick up one of the golf tabs with agate type on newsprint or risk a venture into a golf blog. My hope is to send you out knowing what a course is *about*, how it smells and feels ... how it plays ... and whether it stacks up in terms of that most wily of characteristics, value. All of which means, simply: Is it worth your time and your money?

An Appendix with additional golf-specific and general Las Vegas information closes out the match and all along the way you'll note sidebars scattered about; I'm your caddie and these tips and observations are designed to inform or simply amuse.

About the Approach

Why do golf writers write about golf courses from the perspective of the tips? I've played with a lot of my peers and while some are decidedly better, most play my type of game and I can only think of a couple from the first group who should step all the way back. And if the bulk of the reading public struggles to break 100—honestly, by the rules—why is there such an infatuation with the latest baddest 7,600-yard monstrosity? Some of the cognoscenti will declare it's because real designers design courses from the tips. Sorry. Good design works from every set of markers and if not, the problem with the game is a sick consort of egomaniacal developers and angry angst-driven designers, not how far Tiger and Co. hit the rock.

I'm about a 14. I toss up a lot of 90s, the too-often triple digit, enough 82s to give me hope, and, according to the USGA, I'm a better-than-average player; damn, *that* can't be right. Most parts of my game run hot and cold and if I have a strength, it's length.

This isn't bravura and I'm not trying to bore you. It's just my way of saying I'm like most avid players out there, but one who

thankfully can air it a significant way past the 200-yard range that industry testing shows most men hit their drives. So when I discuss a hole or a course and the course is a par 70-something, my perspective is grounded in a playing experience from whatever tees allow me to err closer to 6,000 yards than 7,500; I mostly play the “blues,” but I’m not limited by color, since I’ll gladly choose teal, gold, fuchsia, or whatever hue is set for my wheelhouse yardage of 6,300-6,600 yards. However, just to keep things apples-to-apples, if in a course review I make a boilerplate reference to a specific yardage for a hole, that’s the yardage from the back-most readily available tee. Con-

fused? Don’t be. It’s just the easiest reference point to ensure we’re all on the same scorecard when it comes to nuts-and-bolts info.

Also, I appreciate the forward tees, even more when they’re two in number and exist with some sense of reasoned intent. By the same token, I respect courses that don’t plink down 18 sets of gilded phalluses each and every day simply because there are 18 additional patches of green somewhere back in the tules.

When it comes to course conditioning, I try not to go too over

I’m Not a Neanderthal ... or a Lefty (Well, I Sorta Am)

You’ll notice throughout that the voice is first-person singular and the perspective male. Since I’m writing the book through my experiences and I’m a guy, those are the default settings.

Now, I love women. I respect women. I know women play golf and go on trips together. I hope women buy and use this book. I’m not a pig, or at least not of that variant. But by happenstance of biology, I look at the game through male eyes (and baggage) and my playing perspective is naturally Cro-Magnon.

And for the lefties: I’m left-handed in most things except golf. So when I talk about ball flight, a draw is right-to-left and a fade is left-to-right (though my personal specialty is the left-to-left).

Thanks for your understanding.

the top, because it's highly variable and a good portion of what passes for high season around here rate-wise isn't, ironically, the best time of year for things to grow. If you show up in town right before or after overseeding, you'll find either brown-out or a lot of fresh sparse green, and neither might be indicative of typical conditions. Summertime humidity can nurture fungus that'll knock out anything from a portion of a green to acres of the short stuff seemingly overnight. So if I do mention conditioning in conjunction with a particular course, it's because the place has never failed to be as neatly groomed as a Brazilian bikini wearer, or dirt and crabgrass either always held court when I was there or the idiot taking reservations either never said a word, or flat-out lied, about the current deplorable conditions.

Pace of play is another matter that's hard to quantify in other than an abstract perfect-world sense. Forget the hallowed 4:15 target; why set such a mark when something quicker might be attainable? Be alert, be polite, and keep moving. As a general rule, I've found Vegas courses to be slower than those in other popular golf destinations, and that's because it's Vegas—more booze, more hangovers, more stakes games, more detachment from the trappings of the world, more “sometime” players, and a lot more wannabes.

As with conditioning, I haven't tried to rank courses in the order of how expeditiously players get around. If I've experienced problems relating to something over which a course has authority—controlling the first tee, spacing between tee times, getting marshals to marshal rather than just driving around in anticipation of their free rounds to come—and play grinds past 4:45 or 5:00, it's duly noted.

Plenty of small “golf publications” out there are passed off as guides. They can be handy little tools when it comes to where it is, how much it is, and how long it is. They're also handy when it comes to “editorial” content dictated by the sales manager, so don't expect much in the way of the reality confronting a green-fee-paying visitor. There are a number of sacred cows in Vegas golf, and if experiences dictate that I gore them, well, tough luck, even if some advertorialists decide to perpetuate the sham on the public.

As noted above, my specific approach is not to grind away with a droning recitation of hole number, par, and length, along with hollow adjectives and asinine superlatives:

The par-5 15th is a blockbuster dynamite 545-yard dogleg-left with OB left;

The 143-yard third hole has several tee boxes and grass on the green;

Seven is what God himself intended for a par-4 hole.

Of course you need some of that boilerplate ... some. And hyperbole has a place ... a measured place.

My reviews vary greatly in length and verve. Some are long, very long, and filled with imagery, metaphor, or a whole lot of crazy rambling. Others are short and perhaps not so sweet. I didn't set out to create perfect guidebook balance wherein each course gets 250 words, no more, no less. I wanted to capture what it's like to *experience* each course. If I was inspired by one and my prose gets a little poetic (or twisted), it's a safe bet that I think the course is a winner when it comes to your needs as a player who is on vacation and seeking a talk-it-up-back-home experience. If, on the other hand, Goat Valley Golf Links is a dog, you'll know it, both by my specific comments and the tone and cadence of the review. My hope is that I capture the spirit of each course—good, bad, ugly, or indifferent—and give you the context as to why. Each course review is effectively an essay, so the work is a collection of discrete experiences oriented around the pursuit of enjoyable golf combined into a guidebook.

I know we won't see eye-to-eye down the line and some course owners will be enraged. But while golf might be the most anal sport of all when it comes to the rules, no other is as wide open when it comes to the field of play, and that, ultimately, is why we all love this grand addictive obsession.