

Golf

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2017 DIRECTORY & TRAVEL ISSUE

Great Trips *for* 2017

Bella Vista

Branson

Hot Springs Village

San Francisco

South Africa

Vermont

Scenic Sandia Golf Club

highlights Albuquerque visit

Official publication of the Oklahoma Golf Association



Pop in for a lofty good time

A full casino resort is available at Sandia Golf Club.

BY DAN VUKELICH

A hot-air balloon, yellow and red and as big as a house, just cleared the treetops as it 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, a visitor to town, 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.

A chase vehicle festooned with flags ar-

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

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

Balloonists come to Albuquerque each fall for the same reason as golfers. The mornings start briskly, then warm quickly. There’s plenty of sunshine and light wind. In a good year, I can play golf in shorts and shirtsleeves through Thanks-

giving. The next best time to play is in May and June, before the summer’s heat and afternoon thunderheads start building. And because we’re a mile above sea level, golf balls here travel about 12 percent farther in the thin, dry air.

Here are some picks for quality golf in the Albuquerque area:

Paa-Ko Ridge Golf Club, (paakoridge.com; 505-281-6000). Recognized perennially on the two top national golf magazines’ Top 100 lists, Paa-Ko was carved by designer Ken Dye through a hilly piñon 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.

Sandia Golf Club (sandiegolf.com;

505-798-3990). Sandia Pueblo's hotel-casino and its golf course designed by Scott Miller (We-Ko-Pa Cholla Course, Couer d'Alene Resort) is just across Interstate 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. Sandia's forgiving resort design gives high-handicap players a chance at finding errant shots, but the greens can be merciless. The Sandia turn house and beverage cart are renowned for fare that can make foodies drool.

Santa Ana Golf Club (mynewmexicogolf.com; 505-867-9464). This 27-hole Ken Killian-designed daily-fee property would likely rank as the top daily-fee course in almost any U.S. city and the friendliness of Santa Ana's staff makes it No. 1 in service locally. On-property is the Prairie Star Restaurant, 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 soak in views of Sandia Peak, which turns watermelon pink as the sun

goes down.

Twin Warriors Golf Club (mynewmexicogolf.com; 505-771-6155). 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. "Twin," as it's called, is the on-property amenity to

The second hole at stunning Paa-Ko Ridge.

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 a cottonwood forest lining the nearby Rio Grande.

University of New Mexico Championship Golf Club (unmgolf.com; 505-277-



Twin Warriors near the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort.



4546). In 1966, Red Lawrence (The Wigwam, Desert Forest) built this hilly test that's hosted NCAA Division I 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 the first or last round of your trip.

Also in Albuquerque: Arroyo del Oso (municipal) Golf Course; Isleta Eagle Golf Course, 27 holes; and UNM North, a nine-hole course on the main UNM campus.

Santa Fe

Cochiti Golf Club (cochitigolfclub.com; 505-465-2230). 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. After years of haphazard management, two veteran PGA professionals turned operations and conditions at Cochiti around so dramatically that it was picked as the state amateur venue.

Marty Sanchez Links de Santa Fe (links-desantafe.com; 505-955-4400), is a city-

owned modified desert links course designed by Baxter Spann just 15 minutes west of the Santa Fe Plaza. "Marty," as it's called, offers a last-minute alternative to gallery-crawling or shopping.

Worth the drive

Towa Golf Club (74 miles, 1 hour, 5 minutes). Built on Pojoaque Pueblo land north of Santa Fe, Towa's nines, designed by Hale Irwin and William Phillips, run through valleys on either side of a boulder-strewn ridge with great views of the desert terrain that Georgia O'Keeffe loved to paint.

Black Mesa Golf Club (84 miles, 1 hour, 15 minutes). Baxter Spann's design north of Santa Fe on Santa Clara Pueblo land has undergone some management changes since it was ranked on the national magazines' Top 100 lists. Spann's use of the existing terrain is a monument to minimalism.

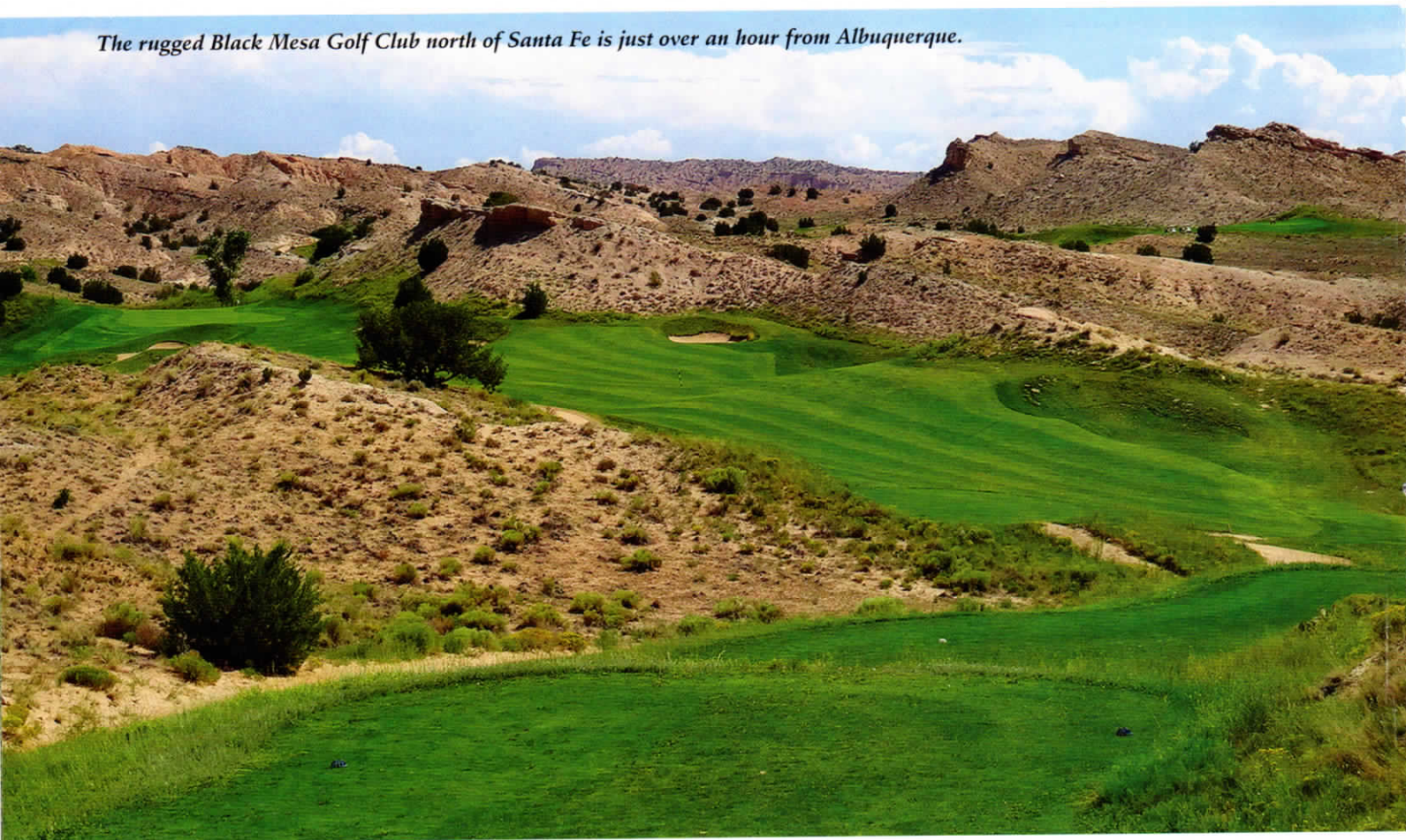
Taos Country Club (127 miles, 2 hours, 10 minutes). Cut through a knee-high forest of sage, it offers dramatic views of 13,159-foot Mount Wheeler, New Mexico's highest peak.

Piñon Hills Golf Course in Farming-



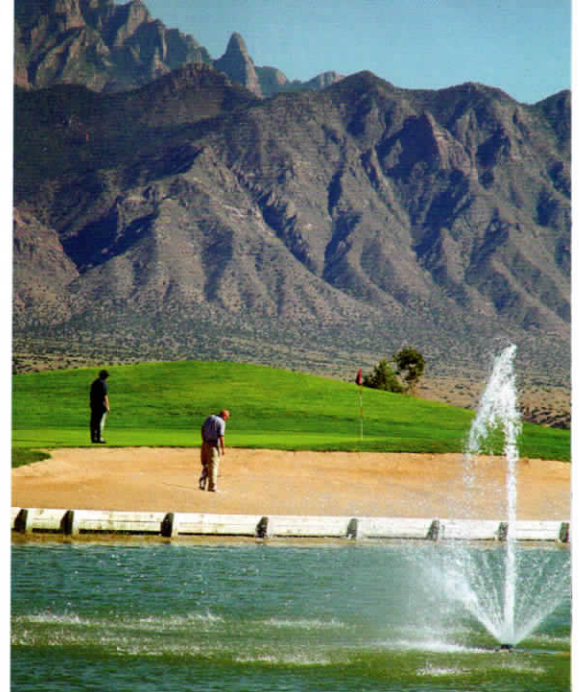
How many of these will land on a golf course?

The rugged Black Mesa Golf Club north of Santa Fe is just over an hour from Albuquerque.





The 2017 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta will be held Oct. 7-15.



Santa Ana Golf Club.

ton, N.M., (181 miles, 3 hours). Piñon Hills once earned Golf Digest's pick as the best municipal golf value in the United States. It's just up the road from gold-medal fly fishing along the San Juan River.

New Mexico Tech Golf Course in Socorro (78 miles, 1 hour 10 minutes). Tech is a hidden gem just off I-25 – an East

Coast target-style course with plenty of mature trees and 18 tiny greens – and was designed by a former New Mexico Tech president.

Inn of the Mountain Gods near Ruidoso (191 miles, 3 hours). Built in 1975 on the Mescalero Apache reservation and now part of a casino-hotel, Ted Robinson's

design claims the title of the first Native American-owned golf enterprise in the United States.

Dan Vukelich, a freelance golf travel writer and former editor of New Mexico's state golf magazine, is editor of ABQ Free Press Weekly, an alternative newspaper in Albuquerque.

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