

Wolf Creek prized for its lunar-like landscape

By Ron Cobb
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Jim Longlas, a Los Angeles-area resident who repairs MRI machines for a living, was having a cold beverage at Wolf Creek Golf Club and extolling the virtues of Mesquite, Nev., as a golf destination.

“Las Vegas got to be too big and too expensive and too crazy,” he said. “Here, you look out at night and it's quiet and the stars are out, and you don't hear any traffic.”

In two sentences, Longlas came close to summing up what makes Mesquite appealing for a growing number of visitors. Situated 80 miles northeast of Las Vegas, the town of about 1,800 offers Vegas-style amenities – quality golf, a desert climate, mountain scenery and gambling – but at a lower price and a more relaxed, congestion-free pace.

Mesquite has six golf courses and seven hotels – four of which are casino hotels – and two spas. It is growing, but far from overgrown. On the north side of Interstate 15, which cuts through the heart of Mesquite, bulldozers crawl around the vast stretches of desert just beyond the edge of town. More condos and retirement housing are on the way. Another golf course is coming in. The Eureka Hotel & Casino is expanding.

Also expanding is Mesquite's profile among getaway-minded golfers. Since 1997, it has been host to the RE/MAX World Long Drive Championship. Last fall, Mesquite was the site of the Golf Channel's reality show, “Big Break.” Word of mouth has spread not only about Mesquite in general but about its crown jewel – Wolf Creek. The 7-year-old course, rated No. 25 on *Golf Digest's* list of America's best public golf courses, winds through an otherworldly series of pale, dirt-based dunes, creating something akin to a lunar landscape.

At \$195 in peak season, Wolf Creek is Mesquite's priciest but most tempting treat. With numerous elevated tees – including one said to be 11 stories high – plus forced carries and tight landing areas, the course demands a lot but delivers a memorable experience.

“I tell golf groups you've got to play Wolf Creek,” said Rick Morris, a Eureka Hotel group golf salesman.

Mesquite's five other courses range from \$100 to \$130 – not out of line for a resort golf destination in the desert Southwest. Those peak season rates drop in the winter and summer.

“A lot of people who come here are used to going to Scottsdale (Ariz.) or Vegas, where the average round is \$220, and it's \$100 cheaper here,” said Cody Law, administrator of Golf Mesquite Nevada, a co-op that represents most of Mesquite's resort hotels, all the golf courses except Wolf Creek and two golf courses in St. George, Utah, 35 miles to the northeast.

Mesquite was founded in the late 1800s by Mormons answering the call to colonize the Virgin River Valley. Only 25 years ago, the town was barely a blip on the radar screen when William “Si” Redd set in motion the

events that would eventually make Mesquite a golf destination. Redd, who died in 2003, had made a fortune as the creator of the video poker machine and as founder of International Gaming Technology. He and a partner bought a truck-stop casino in Mesquite, and the casino became Si Redd's Oasis Hotel and evolved into a resort and spa. Later in the '80s, Redd built Mesquite's first golf course, the Palms.

Redd sold the Oasis in 2001 to Randy Black, CEO of Black Gaming, which now holds the biggest presence in Mesquite as owner of not only the Oasis but also the Virgin River Hotel & Casino and the CasaBlanca Hotel Resort & Casino, along with the Palms Golf Club and CasaBlanca Golf Club.

The CasaBlanca, Mesquite's high-end resort casino and spa, is where the "Big Break" contestants stayed this past summer. Their golf competition was played at the Palms and at the Oasis Golf Club's Palmer Course.

Although Wolf Creek Golf Club apparently has its detractors because of its demand for precision golf, critics seem to be in the minority. "You either like it or you don't. There's no in-between," said the Eureka Hotel's Morris.

"It's fantastic," said Longlas, the MRI repairman from Los Angeles. "Golf magazines say it's like playing golf on Mars. That pretty much says it. From some of the elevated tee boxes, it looks like you have to hit it all the way to Vegas. I love it for the sheer craziness of it."

One of the tee boxes at Wolf Creek is so elevated and so inaccessible to machinery, it has its own mower, tucked away in a tiny shed in a corner of the tee box.

Wolf Creek was designed around and through the dunes that already existed, making it hard for trucks to maneuver. Sand for the bunkers had to be dropped in by helicopter.

Recently, Richard Forsyth and Paul Davidson, both from Newcastle, England, visited Mesquite for a few days of golf during a Western vacation. They had discovered Mesquite simply by doing a Google search for golf in Nevada. Forsyth called Wolf Creek "one of the best courses I've played."

They enjoyed Mesquite's golf and scenery but lamented its limited options at night. "If you're not into casinos, for guys in their 20s and 30s, there's nowhere to go out, really," Forsyth said.

It's true that Mesquite is not teeming with night life outside the casinos, which feature live music, with CasaBlanca offering the widest variety of entertainment. The town is still so small, it takes only five minutes to get from any one place to anywhere else. Mesquite does have a Wal-Mart, but for serious shopping, visitors drive to St. George or Las Vegas.

"We don't cater much to guys who want to go to strip clubs," said Scott Sullivan, general manager at Oasis Golf Club. "Guys here want to play as much golf as they can, go to the buffet, put a few coins in the slot machine and get ready to do it all again the next day."

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