

Freedom Trail Challenge – Tucson & Casino del Sol Resort Provide Different Kind of Golf Trip



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Arizona National designed by Robert Trent Jones II back in grand fashion



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By Tony Leodora

When people think of taking a golf trip to Arizona their minds immediately track to the famous courses in Phoenix or Scottsdale. Those areas hold a special breed of familiarity with golfers from all over the country.

No knock against either location. They have made their mark in traveling golf circles for decades. But, if you are looking for something a bit different ... a bit more adventurous ... a bit more tied to the rugged Old West, look slightly south to Tucson. For years Tucson has provided an outstanding assortment of golf courses – most of them nestled in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains. In the last decade, the Tucson area received a major shot in the arm with the opening to two spectacular resorts.

The first was Dove Mountain, with the Jack Nicklaus-designed course that has hosted the World Match Play Championship the last few years. The second was Sewailo, which opened in 2013. It is nestled up against the spectacular Casino del Sol Resort, which is part of the Pascua Yaqui Indian Nation.

While Dove Mountain has gained worldwide coverage, thanks to the PGA Tour event, Sewailo is just making its mark. And that is why it was chosen as the host site for the 17th Freedom Trail Challenge – an amateur event that has been around the world and across the country. This year's event pitted two 12-man teams – one representing the North and one representing the South. "A lot of the players had never been to Tucson for golf before," said Joe Sosnowski, veteran captain of the North team. "It was a whole new experience for them." And a very rewarding experience.

The casino is a very nice, mid-size casino – with an assortment of excellent dining options. The steakhouse was a favorite of many visitors. Of course, if visitors are looking for authentic Mexican food, Tucson is the place.

"The Tucson Tourist Board gave me an amazing fact about the Mexican restaurants of the Tucson area," said veteran golf writer Bill Huffman, who coordinated the trip for the Freedom Trail Challenge Team, as well as a group of visiting golf media members. "They told me that if you lined up the Mexican restaurants in Tucson, side by side, it would stretch for more than 20 miles." But golfers do not live by food alone. They need a comfortable place to rest their weary bones after a long day of golf. The hotel, with its newly opened tower,

was spectacular. The rooms ranged from large ... to very large. Most provided stunning views of the golf course and the surrounding hills. All of this made for entertaining nights ... but it was the golf during the day that sent the visitors home with an abundance of stories.

Four courses were chosen for the competition. They provided a nice variety of old and new ... mountainous to relatively flat.

Randolph North was the first of the four courses. It dates back to 1924 and is one of the oldest courses in Arizona. A recent renovation has restored the luster to this gem. It is more parkland style – than the typical target golf style of modern desert courses. There are large trees that line the fairways and a number of interesting water features. The course is operated as a municipal golf course and is one of the outstanding golf values of the area.

Westin La Paloma is a semi-private course that is only open to members and hotel guests. Designed by Jack Nicklaus in the mid-'80s, it has 27 holes of golf cut out of the mountains. The rugged terrain makes for many interesting shots ... and some treacherous ones. There are a number of elevation changes that provide spectacular vistas of the golf course and the surrounding mountains. It is a pure desert experience.

Arizona National first opened under the name of The Raven at Sabino Springs. It was designed by Robert Trent Jones II in the mid-'90s. The course fell on hard times and actually closed for a couple of years. Recent new ownership and renovations have brought it back in grand fashion. The course abuts the Coronado National Forest and follows the rugged natural flow of the land across shady mesquite-lined gulches and rock outcroppings. The course has been home to professional golf events, as well as home course until recently for the University of Arizona golf teams.

Sewailo has only been open for two years but it is making quite a name for itself. It was designed by former PGA Tour player Notah Begay, who dedicated the course to his Native American heritage. The course is gigantic in scope, with extra-large green complexes and holes that are generously separated from other holes. There are a number of natural and man-made water features on the golf course. The course measures 7,400 yards from the championship tees but there are five sets of tees, so golfers can pick their poison.

Overall, the trip to Tucson proved to be a great mix of entertainment, comfort and exceptional golf. Oh, and by the way, the North team pulled out a very close win over the South – providing another reason to tell stories once the players returned home.