

Kamloops up to the challenge

New courses like Tobiano add to allure of emerging golf destination

By IAN HUTCHINSON, SPECIAL TO SUN MEDIA

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KAMLOOPS, B.C. — It's not unusual to see snow covered peaks around Kamloops, even in late spring, but below there were also small specks of white poking out of the grass.

These weren't remnants of winter on the up and down terrain of the new Tobiano Golf design, which rolls along the frigid waters of Kamloops Lake in the British Columbia interior. These were prizes for anyone brave enough to venture down the steep slopes and retrieve the multitude of golf balls that dotted the hillsides.

One person's loss is another's gain and the fact most of the golf balls were not premium brands suggests the original owners were wary of the challenge ahead. Who can blame them for using a moderately-priced ball after looking over the gully on the par 3 seventh hole and seeing a green that allows little room for error? Being even slightly off sends a ball rolling down the steep slopes.

It doesn't get any easier on the next hole, a par 5 that reaches 585 yards from the tips, where a carry of close to 200 yards is necessary for success. Otherwise, it's another lost ball unless you brought your mountain climbing equipment.

Those two holes are part of a strong front nine that became the topic of debate on a recent visit, some saying it should be turned into the back nine, so players can warm up to it. Not that the current back nine is a walk in the park, but it is kinder and gentler than the one that now comes before it.

Either way, this is a golf course that emphasizes the importance of choosing the right tees on a layout that stretches from 5,289 to 7,328 yards. If ego gets in the way of clear thinking when deciding tee boxes, prepare for a long day.

It isn't all about distance, which will be aided or hindered by the wind depending on where you are on the course. It's also about shot-making as Canadian designer Tom McBroom has worked the fairways and greens to favour shots to certain sides. Anything on the other side will funnel the ball off the fairway.

On this visit, for example, a shot on the 17th hole, a par 3, demanded that you hit the right side of the green, which allowed it to take a 90-degree turn to the left and cozy up close to the hole.

From there, you're only a hole away from a warm clubhouse where the friendly staff add some magnificent touches to their offerings. Worth noting is the touch of horseradish in the Bloody Caesars that certainly takes the edge off a tough day on the course and earned one bartender the nickname "Queen Caesar."

Tobiano is destined to become a Canadian classic. The wow factor is off the charts, which explains the enthusiasm that filters down from president Michael Grenier through GM/golf director Miles Mortensen to Queen Caesar herself and the rest of the staff at ground level.

While the course itself is a crown jewel for Kamloops, the trick now is to support it with accommodations and attractions that will lure golfers from traditional B.C. hot spots for golf such as Vancouver, Whistler, the Okanagan Valley and Victoria, among others.

Plans are in place to build a lakeside community consisting of residential units, up to 450 hotel rooms, village centre, 100-slip marina and equestrian centre on what was the site of Six Mile Ranch.

The golf course and development will be a nice complement to a lovely town that is sprucing up its image for tourists. On our visit, we bunked in at the comfortable Four Points by Sheraton, a stay that was highlighted by the sumptuous fare at Ric's Grill.

Certainly, the Kamloops area is highlighted by an impressive, if underrated, golf product that includes The Dunes at Kamloops, Sun Peaks, Rivershore, Sun Rivers and many more, including a delightful new layout that taught a lesson in native Canadian history at the Talking Rock Resort and Quaaout Lodge.

Owned by the Little Shuswap band, Quaaout means where the sun's rays first meet the water and Little Shuswap Lake certainly does sparkle on a sunny day. So did the golf course.

Talking Rock tells the stories of the First Nations through pictographs on rock faces and the story in golf is that all levels will enjoy their day on this course.

Opened in 2007, Talking Rock stretches from 5,437 to 7,129 yards as it winds through mature forest, taking a noticeable rise in elevation on the back nine with mountains and the shoreline of Little Shuswap Lake providing magnificent panoramas.

Talking Rock complements Tobiano as the latest additions to the area around Kamloops that is emerging as a powerful, picturesque alternative to the desirable golf destinations that already exist in B.C.

For more information, see tobianogolf.com, talkingrock.ca and tourismkamloops.ca.

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