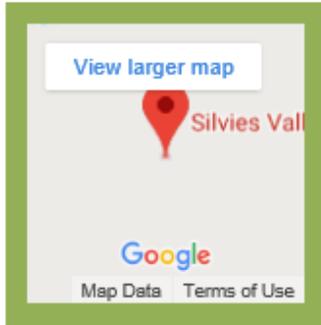


DESTINATION Silvies Valley

BY JOHN STEINBREDER

SENECA, OREGON | In the early 1800s, fur traders began laying out what became the Oregon Trail, which came to run some 2,170 miles from present-day Missouri and Kansas to the Pacific Northwest. Initially built to accommodate walkers, it evolved into something of a thoroughfare for the large-wheeled wagons that brought tens of thousands of settlers to the American frontier.



Two centuries later, a different sort of route is taking hold in the Beaver State, only this one moves from west to east and has been cut by and for golfers. It begins on the Pacific Ocean in southwestern Oregon, where in the past 20 years developer Mike Keiser has fashioned the superlative Bandon Dunes resort, and continues 260 miles northeast to Bend, a one-time logging town in central Oregon that today features some 30 courses, among them the highly regarded Pronghorn, Crosswater and Tetherow tracks. Then, it leads people to the high desert another 100 miles or so to the east and the recently opened Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch.

This 140,000-acre property is located 4,600 feet above sea level in country so remote that towns are dozens of miles apart, and livestock far outnumber people in most places. And its primary allure for golfers is a pair of reversible 18-hole golf courses that are as brilliantly conceived by architect Dan Hixson as they are interesting to play. There also is a testy nine-hole, par-3 track called Egan, which was the appellation American settlers gave to the Paiute Indian war chief Pony Blanket, who once lived in the area, and a seven-hole loop dubbed McVeigh's Gauntlet, which is routed on and around a small set of ridges and named after a hard-drinking Scottish homesteader who came to Silvies in the early 1900s.



The goat caddies on McVeigh's Gauntlet aren't world-class loopers, but they're not baaaaaa-d.

As fun as the golf is on the McVeigh track, the main attractions there are the goat caddies, with the animals carrying clubs in custom-made packs as players lead them from tees to greens, tying the beasts up to hitching posts when it is time to hit their shots. And when their rounds on any of the Silvies Valley courses are done, guests may then indulge in a variety of ranch activities, from cattle drives and trail rides to pistol and rifle shooting. The idea is to give visitors a feel for this part of Oregon, a throwback sort of spot where most folks still wear cowboy hats and wave when they pass each other on the road in their

pickups, and offer them some very good golf.

Having come from pioneer stock myself, with great-grandparents who crossed Texas in a covered wagon in the 1880s and then raised cattle in the Davis Mountains on land that several of my cousins still work, I have a special affinity for that way of life. So it was with great anticipation that I made the trek to Silvies, an area notable for the "wet meadows" that produce the rich grasses ranchers harvest for feed and the scrubby hills that are covered with sagebrush and occasional herds of cattle, horses and goats as well as elk, mule deer and pronghorn antelope.

Silvies takes its name from Antoine Sylvaille, a French fur trader employed by the Hudson Bay Co. and credited with discovering the valley in the early 1830s. Over time, raising cattle replaced trapping beavers as the primary economic engine of the region, and in 1883, the Silvies Valley Ranch came into being. For many decades, homesteader Jack Craddock and his son Chet led that outfit. But the family sold out in the late 1950s, and for the next half century, a series of eight owners held the property, subjecting it to almost endless mismanagement. Then in 2007, retired veterinarian Scott Campbell and his wife, Sandy, purchased the spread, which lies between the towns of John Day and Burns on Highway 395 and is about 25 miles long and as much as 16 miles wide in places. Campbell grew up in Burns, minored in ranch management in college and made millions through the Banfield Pet Hospital that he operated in Portland and the veterinarian clinics he later opened in more than 800 PetSmart stores around the country.

Campbell set about to make Silvies Valley a viable ranch once again, restoring the name and then the enterprise by building up his herd of cattle to about 4,500 head and adding some 1,700 American Range goats, which he is raising for their meat – using Australian sheepdogs to herd them and white-furred Great Pyrenees to protect them from coyotes and other predators. Then he hit upon the idea of adding a resort element to the enterprise. Campbell saw it as a way to diversify economically and give his operation one more stream of revenue as he also promoted tourism and created jobs in the rather isolated and undeveloped Grant and Harney Counties. As a person with pioneer roots, Campbell also wanted to give people a way to experience what he describes as “frontier Oregon” and a way of life that is foreign to most of them.

That sense of the Old West is palpable at Silvies, beginning with my room in one of the ranch houses, with its wood-paneled walls, blond pine furniture, colorful Native American blankets and wrought-iron lamps. Later, I head to the lodge for a drink and dinner, and stepping into that log-cabin structure is like stepping back in time, with vintage lassos, spurs and chaps hanging from the walls along with Indian blankets and light fixtures made of deer antlers. An old stagecoach stands in one corner of the building, and swinging doors lead into a game room as country music plays in the background. I feel right at home.

I order a rye from a vast and impressive collection of whiskies, and the bartender gives me what he calls a “cowboy pour,” which amounts to at least four fingers of booze. Needless to say, I do not need to order another before sitting down to dinner at the so-called ranch table, which can accommodate as many as 22 people – and where meals are served family style. (There are also tables and booths for those who prefer to sup in more intimate settings.)



The ranch table

Then the food starts coming out – first homemade sourdough bread and butter seasoned with herbs grown from a garden outside and after that shiitake mushrooms stuffed with sausage made from the ranch's goats. For my main course, I opt for brisket from an F-1 Silvies Valley cow, which is a Red Angus heifer bred to a Hereford bull. As for wine, there was no shortage of excellent choices from a list of reds that included bottles from Cakebread, Caymus, Chateau Montelena, Shafer, Spottswoode, Turley and Ridge. I go with an Old Vine Zinfandel from Turley, and it pairs perfectly with the goat and also the beef. Once our meal is done, I head out to the terrace, which overlooks a lake and features an old chuck wagon as well as a full bar and a fire pit. I savor another whisky as the moon rises and masses of stars begin to twinkle as do several planets, Mars among them. And I am quickly reminded that there is nothing quite as big and beautiful as a Western sky.

The next two days, I learn there is also something special about reversible golf courses, for native Oregonian and one-time golf professional Hixson designed a pair of par-72 beauties at Silvies. There are two distinct routings, called the Craddock and the Hankins after two pioneer families from this area, and each one measures a touch longer than 7,000 yards from the tips. They also share 16 fairways and 27 greens. Hixson's concept was a bold one, born in part from how the Old Course at St. Andrews was played in opposite directions for many years, and Campbell liked the idea for the efficient use it made of the land and the unique playing opportunities it provided his guests. He also appreciated the inducement it gave them to stay longer, with the Craddock being open one day and the Hankins the other.



The Egan course at Silvies Valley

So, how does a reversible course work? Well, the first day I tee it at Silvies, with Colby Marshall, who carries the marvelous job title of vice president, livestock and guest services, we play the Craddock, with the first hole being a slightly uphill par-5 with a tee just off Egan's Hideout, the name the Campbells have given the modest building that doubles as the pro shop and clubhouse. The following morning, I trod that same ground but in an entirely different direction as we played that as No. 18 on the Hankins, which also happens to be a par-5 but one that plays back to the Hideout. I find the mix of holes enticing and also the elevation changes, with many of the tees offering the chance not only to take in sweeping views of the ranch but also to hit big, booming downhill drives. The fairways are wide, the putting surfaces quite ample and interesting and the undulations from tee to green give the courses plenty of character as do the bunkers, which are filled with a fine, gray-black kind of sand. Hixson did not put in water hazards on these tracks, and I notice a difference in how the flattish areas played (because they had once been wet meadows and were naturally spongier) and the slopes (which were dried and ran firmer and faster). Though the holes take up only a total of 130 acres or so, the layouts feel much bigger and more open, a sensation that was no doubt enhanced by the fact that there is no housing along any of the holes. The aura is quite serene, and my trips around the course recalled the splendid silence that comes with working cattle and spending long days in the saddle without seeing or hearing another soul. I like the design of the holes, too, and also the way Hixson's courses evoke the frontier country in which he constructed them. And all I want to do is keep playing.



After trying to shoot par on the golf courses, guests can go to the range to shoot rifles and pistols.

Marshall, however, has other things in mind, the first of which is a lengthy session at the pistol range, where I shoot a number of models, including the classic Colt .45, also known as the Peacemaker and the "gun that won the West," thinking the whole time that many of the early homesteaders at Silvies no doubt relied on that same weapon for much more important purposes than target practice.

After that, we check out the goat herds as well as some of the “swathers” harvesting hip-high grass in the wet meadows and then the horse barns, where Campbell is doctoring a few of his steeds. We also spend an hour or two just driving around, which is something you often do on a ranch, checking on livestock and the state of the places where they feed and water, taking note of the birds and wildlife we came across as we drove up and down rugged dirt roads. And all I could think of was how much I was enjoying the trip down this trail. With and without my clubs.

DESTINATION Silvies Valley

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

SENECA, OREGON | As you might expect from a place that prides itself on being part of Frontier Oregon, Silvies Valley is a bit off the beaten path and takes some time to reach. For my visit, I flew to Boise, Idaho, which is about 140 miles east of the resort, and then rented a car for the roughly three-hour drive. It’s a long but extraordinarily beautiful trek on an often-twisting, two-lane blacktop that takes drivers through hilly, semi-arid cattle country and “wet meadow” valleys as well as parts of the Malheur National Forest, which is replete with stands of ponderosa pines as well as cedars and several types of fir.

Flying into the central Oregon town of Redmond, which is west and just outside the town of Bend, is another option, and the trip from there to Silvies is just as scenic and perhaps 30 minutes shorter. The only problem with that airport is that it is not nearly as well-served as the one in Boise.



Silvies Field

Those able to avail themselves of private aircraft can fly in and out of the resort's airfield, which is 5,000 feet in length and able to accommodate any and all prop planes as well as some jets. In addition, the nearby towns of John Day and Burns, approximately 25 and 38 miles away, respectively, have fixed-base operators capable of handling bigger aircraft.

To carry clubs for rounds on McVeigh's Gauntlet, the goat caddies use custom-made backpacks from Seamus Golf, the stylish golf accessories concern based outside Portland, Ore. Each piece is made to hold six golf clubs and six cans of beer as well as a handful of golf balls and peanuts, which are traditionally offered to the caprines as tips for jobs well done.

Even though the spa at Silvies Valley had yet to be completed by the time of my visit, a tour of the construction site for that facility made me pine to return to the resort just to see how that facility turns out. The half-size Olympic pool was reason enough to do that, and so were the massages that will be offered in the seven treatment rooms. The menu also will include facials, pedicures and manicures and various rubs and scrubs. As for the fitness center, it will be a great place to get in a workout, if you are not already worn out by all the golf and hiking and riding you can do here.



Cabins at Silvies Valley

As isolated as Silvies may be, I was delighted to discover that my Internet connections in the main buildings of the resort as well as the cabins and ranch houses were quite strong and consistent. And there is solid cell service available wherever you can latch onto Wi-Fi. But once you get out of range of those spots, you have to rely on hand radios for communication with members of the Silvies staff and fellow guests.

Mosquitoes can be a bit of a problem at sundown, especially around the lake beyond the multi-level terraces behind the lodge. But ranch and resort owner Scott Campbell and his wife, Sandy, are trying to control the pesky insects through the installation of hundreds of bird and bat houses around the property.

Silvies boasts a solid practice facility with lots of room both long and wide to hit shots and proper reminders of Old Oregon. Such as the vintage wagon by the tee, in which bags of golf balls are stored. And the wagon wheels serve as markers on the range itself.