

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

[Goat caddies are only hint of fun to be had at Oregon's Silvies Ranch](#)



*The reversible golf courses at Silvies Valley Ranch are set in the hills of eastern Oregon.*

(Tod Leonard

Goats got us there, but reversible golf courses at Silvies Valley Ranch are the real attraction

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SENECA, Ore. — We have to start with the goats.

There are so many other appealing aspects to the Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch: an impressive reversible championship golf layout that's part of 52 holes, fine dining, luxury accommodations.

But, honestly, as both a golfer and animal lover, the goats are what drew me to the high, dry plains of eastern Oregon.

Goats serving as caddies. I had to see this.

And there they were on an early August morning, Bruce and Mike, waiting in their own version of a caddie shack for their wrangler, Hadley Marshall, to put custom-made leather packs on their backs and traverse with me and my golf buddy Steve over the whimsical seven-hole course known as McVeigh's Gauntlet.

Oceanside has its Goat Hill course, but this was the real deal, a true hike along a razorback ridge on which course designer Dan Hixson managed to put greens in diabolical places.



*Hadley Marshall leads "Mike" the goat caddie away from a green on McVeigh's Gauntlet course at Silvies Valley Ranch.*

Owing to the entire theme of fun at Silvies, which you may have already picked up on, there's even a par-2 "beer" hole with a 7 1/2-inch cup. Replete with a full cooler of cold ones, we could have easily spent the entire morning playing putting and chipping games on the tricky, 47-yard hole with a crowned "fairway."

Mike, our caddie, would have been just fine with that, as long as there were enough peanuts in his bag. Peanuts are Mike's filet mignon. He dawdled for much of the round, Hadley getting a workout pulling on his rope, while Mike bent frequently at the knees to loudly munch on weeds.

Mike was unapologetically clueless to our golf. If he actually watched a single golf shot, I missed it.

But when we made the downhill turn for home, and Mike knew there were peanuts waiting as a reward, we nearly sprinted to the final green.

Hadley, the daughter of Silvies Vice President Colby Marshall, told us that Mike is the most easygoing of the caddie pair.

"They definitely have their personality quirks," Hadley said. "I think Bruce has a little bit more of an ego because he gets more press. Bruce very much wants things his own way. Mike, he's, like, 'I'm going out and am going to make it count.' "

Bruce and Mike made headlines in publications around the country when Silvies celebrated its soft opening in 2017. In a stroke of inspiration by the Campbell family that owns the 144,000-acre working ranch, whose occupants include 4,500 head of cattle and 2,600 American Range goats harvested for meat, it was decided they could spare a couple of goats for the caddie gig.

“There’s an incentive program,” joked Silvies’ award-winning executive chef, Damon Jones, on who makes it to the golf course or becomes a main course at the resort’s dinner table. (On the menu, the meat is more delicately known as chevon, which is quite tasty.)

The goats are gimmicky, but they say a lot about the vibe at Silvies. There is a sense that everything here was meticulously thought out and executed, while keeping a focused eye on comfort and entertainment.

Reads the back of the Gauntlet scorecard: “Goats and fun govern all play.”

I heard about the resort from San Diegan Roger Porzak, a Century Club member and former board president of the San Diego Junior Golf Association. Porzak and his wife, Melissa, visited Silvies earlier in the year with their golf instructor son, Adam, and his young family. Melissa called the experience “life-changing.”

Apparently, it was. In September, Roger Porzak announced that he’d taken the job as director of golf at Silvies. He starts there soon and will work the winter months recruiting groups from various clubs around the country for visits, then serving on site during the golf season from April through October.

“I just love the western mystique,” Porzak explained this week. “And I loved the blending of that with links-style golf in the hills of eastern Oregon.”

Oregon is known for two prime golf destinations — Bandon Dunes and the area surrounding Bend and the Sunriver Resort. Silvies sits alone to the east, about halfway between the airports in Bend and Boise, Idaho. (Porzak said a new road from Boise has cut the trip to about 2½ hours from there.)

It’s not an easy place to get to, and to catch the attention of golf travelers, they had to pull off something special here. They did.

Silvies is a true getaway, with everything you need at the resort, including the meals in the ranch-style dining room with long, communal tables. Guests check their car in at the gate and get a custom golf cart to use for the entire stay.

Beyond the golf, there is a full-service spa, horseback riding, shooting, fishing, biking, eco tours and carriages pulled by a team of Clydesdales.

The cabin accommodations are made to look rustic on the outside, but their interiors are as plush as any suites in a big-city resort. In a two-bedroom cabin, there is a full kitchen, a large living room with bedrooms connected on each side, and we counted five TVs.

With all of the other attractions, golf still is Silvies’ primary draw. The owners knew that as a remote destination they simply couldn’t build 18 holes and let it ride. They had to provide bits of various golf experiences to be attractive to large groups and couples.

Thus, the McVeigh challenge course, the nine-hole, 875-yard Chief Egan “family” course, and the true centerpieces — the Craddock and Hankins layouts.

Hixson, whose designs include Bandon Crossing, was charged with creating a reversible course that could be played one direction one day and the other direction the next. The most lauded facility with this concept has been Tom Doak’s The Loop at Forest Dunes in Michigan.

I played The Loop a couple of summers ago and found it to be a bit mundane. The land was too flat and many of the holes too similar.

Architectural sticklers will note that at Silvies, Hixson “cheated.” He designed 27 greens — nine that are used in each direction, and nine unique to each course. For me, it’s a big improvement, because it allowed the designer to use various changes in elevation to provide more variety.

Having noted that, some of the most enjoyable greens are those that you’re playing for a second time and calculating how different the angles are. Predictably, most of the greens are massive, with some heavy undulation that is a bit overdone at times.

The scenery is generally striking, with the rolling hills covered in wavy yellow grass and dotted with Ponderosa pines. The bunkers are penal, composed of a dark, heavy dirt and surrounded by fescue. But this isn’t Whistling Straits; there aren’t hundreds of them.

Steve and I have both played a number of the nicer resorts in the country, and we found the experiences at Silvies to rank among the best of them. Golf Digest agrees. In 2018, it named the Craddock and Hankins courses, third and fourth, respectively, among its Best New Courses list.

Here’s betting that golfers at none of the other courses watched genuine cowboys and herding dogs cajole dozens of sheep up the side of the hill next to a fairway, as we witnessed in our second round.

At the home of the goat caddies, we couldn’t ask for more.