

Travel Dispatch: Silvies Valley Ranch

I'm in a Polaris 900 RZR with resort owner Scott Campbell racing around his Eastern Oregon property. Most golf resorts convey a polished look, with neatly dressed travelers reveling in posh sweaters and tasseled loafers. Not here at Silvies Valley Ranch. There's crap flying everywhere.

I know, because 20 minutes into the ride on this ATV-like vehicle across a corner of this massive spread my right side is already flecked with cattle turd. That's the price you pay for sitting in the exposed jump seat when touring a ranch where cows and goats wander around. We keep stopping at small streams so I could clean my pants leg and sleeve, but to no avail and really, as far as I'm concerned, to no regard. It's all part of what makes a stay at this place so special.

Roughing it. The call of the wild here makes missing fairways seem tame by comparison. If your idea of taking a break is playing golf, why not go all the way and immerse yourself in grasslands, native bogs, ponderosa pine forests, and fields of buckwheat and sagebrush? Up here on a property where the elevation varies from 4,600 to 6,200 feet above sea level, the air is stunningly clear and the views across the Blue Mountains make you wonder what happened to civilization.

Campbell is fine with the remoteness of the place. He grew up in the area surrounded by ranch life, then trained as a large animal veterinarian before setting up shop in Portland, where he started with one small office and gradually built a large scale enterprise of animal hospitals across the country—a practice that revolutionized industry economics and care. The success he enjoyed enabled him to return to his roots a dozen years ago, this time as the owner of a massive ranch midway between Bend, Oregon and Boise, Idaho, three hours by car from each.

The 600 acres devoted to golf comprise but a tiny speck on the map of this place. We're talking about a resort destination that sprawls across 140,000 acres or 219 square miles. That's an area exactly the size of Columbus, Ohio with its 787,000 people. Silvies Valley Ranch, by contrast, is home to 15 human souls, plus another 78 employees who commute. Of course, they have a lot of company—4,500 cattle, 3,000 goats, and herds of wild elk and antelope that troop across the plains as if they own the place.



SILVIES VALLEY RANCH

Stunning views of Malheur National Forest and the Blue Mountain abound from the courses

A drive of 25 miles to work (or just to get gas) is nothing out in the high desert of Eastern Oregon. Silvies Valley Ranch straddles two counties, Grant and Harney, with a combined area of 14,700 square miles and exactly the same number for total population. That's one person per square mile over an area that is actually larger than the combined landmass of Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

The scale of the land lent itself to something different than your standard 18-hole routing. The course here is actually a reversible layout—sort of. Architect Dan Hixson, who spent years as an Oregon club pro and aspiring competitive player (including stints on the Australian and Asian Tours) says he always wanted to do a golf course that could be played in alternate directions. He had toyed with the idea before but never found the land or the owner who would venture it. Having enjoyed critical success with prior works at Bandon Crossings in Bandon, Oregon and Wine Valley in Walla Walla, Washington, he thought that the wide-open space offered by Silvies Valley Ranch provided the ideal blank slate.

Students of architecture have long been fascinated by the reversibility of The Old Course at St. Andrews—a layout that was regularly scheduled on alternate weeks in the nineteenth century to play in opposite directions. Only in the twentieth century did the now-standard counterclockwise sequence come to prevail over the lesser known “clockwise” routing.

Campbell, a Scotsman by virtue of family heritage, knew of St. Andrews but as an occasional golfer he was not all that familiar with the nuances of course routing. When Hixson brought up the idea of doing a reversible layout, Campbell's reaction was a mixture of indifference and mild curiosity. Hixson first figured he'd do six reversible holes in the middle of the layout on lower laying ground.

After 15 minutes of conversation, Campbell says he agreed, “but only if the entire could would be reversible, not just part of it.” The kicker in the argument was less the sheer novelty of a reversible layout than the appeal that such a routing would entice guests to stay two days to play the resort’s golf offering. “Two for one,” says Hixson.

Easier said than done. Particularly because unlike St. Andrews, which was built on flat ground and allowed for easy flex and reversibility, the golf ground at Silvies Valley Ranch was a mixture of broad, open grassland, densely treed areas, and occasional steep slopes.

For starters, there were no rules about a reversible routing. As Hixson says, “St. Andrews only has 11 greens, so in effect, anything goes. We were not constrained by any expectations.”

Campbell was not exactly in a hurry to have the course completed. Given the amount of work needed to restore the ranch, its roads, outbuildings, and its wetlands and stream flow, having Hixson take his time was a virtue. He’s not, after all, someone prone to designing on paper and handing the plans to a contractor. Hixson himself headed up a tiny crew that built the playing field by hand over several years.

Site work began in the fall of 2009 when Hixson’s team mowed down centerlines for the proposed routing. It took about a year to cut trees selectively, tear out stumps, and remove debris piles, and another year or two to do the feature shaping, including construction of the greens. Winters rendered the site impassable, so work could only proceed once the snow and ice had cleared. Seeding and grow-in added 18 more months. The golf course was not playable until the summer of 2017—seven years after work began. Along the way, Hixson figures he made 135 trips from his home in Portland—five and one-half hours each way by car. To say the least, he was a frequent houseguest at Campbell’s home in those pioneer days.

The result of all of those trips back and forth is fascinating golf ground. The main “course” actually comprises two 18-hole layouts, called **Craddock** (7,035 yards, par-72) and **Hankins** (7,035 yards, par-73). Each layout has only three sets of tees, with the intermediate markers measuring 6,340 and 6,280, respectively, and the forward-most registering 5,560 and 5,335 yards. That’s a very traditional tee arrangement, and indicative of the general aversion out here to vertical clutter or adornment.



Dan Hixson’s reversible routing rambles over fascinating golf ground

It all adds up to 125 acres of irrigated turf, with 27 greens averaging 6,000 square feet in size. Nine of those putting surfaces perform double-duty. Depending upon counting rules, each course has four or five holes that are unique to its own routing with (much) sharing. Having said that, Craddock circles left-to-right; Hankins is routed right-to-left. Generally, the routing manages to include the occasional dramatic downhill while avoiding the steep upslope the opposite way.

Superintendent Sean Hoolehan, a veteran of Oregon golf turfgrass, presides over a firm and fast playing surface. The greens are a three-way blend of bentgrass; the fairways and immediate roughs are a mix of fescues and bluegrass. The bunkers, befitting their status as hazards, are rough-hewn pits and can be very nasty in spots. Good thing there’s lots of room around these hazards for a golf ball to avoid rolling into the sand.

The long views out into Malheur National Forest and the Blue Mountains are stunning. And there are some real standout holes



Guests can stay in spacious, hand-crafted luxury cabins

as well. A three-hole stretch in the middle of Craddock (nos. 10, 11, and 12), forms a par-3-4-3 sequence that is isolated in a steady climb through ponderosa woodlands and not played in reverse on the Hankins layout. The most memorable run on Hankins, by contrast, is a reversible stretch of par 4s (nos. 9, 10, and 11) that extend partially along woodland and play across dramatically rolling terrain.

It's a joy to play, all the while looking over your shoulder (or ahead) to figure out where the routing is going to or coming from and what happens to the holes in the other direction. With each 18-hole course available on alternate days, you really do need to play on back-to-back days at Silvies Valley Ranch to get a sense for the lay of the land.

It quickly becomes apparent that the place works. It's also part of a modest little trend in golf, now that a counterpart course has opened in upstate Michigan. The Loop, a Tom Doak creation at Forest Dunes, is stricter in its reversibility, with holes directly opposite on every green and fairway. Silvies Valley Ranch is more of an adventure.

Hixson's routing, especially his avoidance of steep uphill holes, makes these twinned layouts easily walkable. For those who have not had enough of the big layout(s), there's more relaxed golf on two adjoining short courses. The **Chief Egan Course** is a 9-hole par-3 layout perched between open grassy meadow and water hazards. **McVeigh's Gauntlet Course** is a contrasting rugged seven-hole layout on broken ground with testing uphill holes. So testing, in fact, that players have the option of employing a goat caddie to schlep the bag and bleat out occasional advice. Let's just call it a marketing gimmick that only works if you're more interested in goats than golf. The course stands quite well on its own as a vigorous little test.

When I saw chavon on the dinner menu at the ranch's restaurant I figured that was the punishment for recalcitrant goat loopers. But no, it turns out that organic goat meat is one of many products produced by the 3,000 goats on the ranch. The Campbell family also maintains a herd of 4,500 cattle for commercial purposes.

Dinners, by the way, are served at common sittings in the lodge-style main ranch house. Chef Damon Jones whips up seven course meals with farm-to-table flair and shows up at each course to introduce it (briefly).

Besides golf, Silvies Valley Ranch features trail hiking, a spa, horse riding, bicycling, pond and stream fishing, and shooting (pistol, rifle, shotgun). While the tone of the resort is decidedly low key and off the grid, all guests are outfitted with a radio



McVeigh's Gauntlet Course is a rugged seven-hole layout

device just in case they should wander off or need a beer on the 15th hole.

It's easy to get lost out here. Even with 600 miles of fencing around the property, wild herds of elk and antelope seem confident in finding their way across.

Yet the place does have its native appeal. That's evident in the eight handcrafted luxury cabins that now adorn the unpaved path to the golf course. The retreat, which just opened in May, also has 18 hotel-style rooms; each features one or two king-size beds. Campbell, ever the optimist, launched plans for comfortable but unobtrusive housing set back from the golf course and the active ranch land. He's approved for as many as 600 units, with initial plans to build five or six a year in the hopes of sparking interest among prospective buyers keen to embrace the rugged outdoors.

Build it and some people will find it. The Craddock and Hankins courses clocked 7,000 rounds combined in 2018. The golf season at Silvies Valley Ranch runs from May to late October. Summers are moderate, with average high temperatures in July and August just topping 80 degrees.

The remoteness is part of the charm of the place. Getting here is a cinch if you fly privately. The ranch's own 5,350-foot-long airstrip (Silvies Airport, OG14) is available for daylight landings. Otherwise, it's a breezy drive following a fly-in to Boise Airport (BOI), 220 miles away, or 170 miles from Central Oregon's Redmond Municipal Airport (RMD).

The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch

silvies.us; 800-745-8437 or 541-573-5150