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## Recreational & Outdoor Sports

### Laughlin area now golf destination

By Bill Huffman, For the Tribune

November 23, 2005

For years, the golf scene in Bullhead City and nearby Laughlin, Nev., might have been best described as a "vast wasteland." With a couple of nine-holers and a RV tract or two, most people who lived or visited the area had to head south toward Parker or Lake Havasu City to find good golf.

But suddenly, Bullhead City-Laughlin has a 1-2 punch in Laughlin Ranch and El Rio Country Club.

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Of the two, Laughlin Ranch, which is located two miles east of Bullhead City, will knock your golf socks off. El Rio, which is 15 minutes south of Bullhead City, also has its moments.

Stretched out over a wide-open alluvial fan that wanders down from the nearby Black Mountains all the way to the Colorado River, Laughlin Ranch is a sight to behold. Especially with its emerald fairways and greens contrasted against the stark-rock backdrop.

While some of the course seems to border the last bastion of civilization, the rest works its way up and down the hills over covered bridges and past spectacular stone walls and cascading waterfalls.

According to David Druzisky, the Scottsdale architect who created the first of four courses at Laughlin Ranch, it took "somewhere between \$15 million to \$20 million" to build the first one.

"I'm not exactly sure the final costs — there were lots of moving parts — but it was very expensive," said Druzisky of the 7,155-yard layout that meanders its way over 86 acres of this 12,000-acre community. "It was a very complicated project where we moved a staggering 6 1/2 million cubic yards of dirt. And we did it in less than a year, by working double shifts — many of them under the lights."

Despite the rush to the finish line, Laughlin Ranch turned out like a diamond in the rough, as literally everything from the course to the clubhouse is well done. The up-and-down flow of holes makes for a roller-coaster round, and at times you have to stop to regain your balance on these slip-sliding fairways and teetering greens.

With no expense spared, the results are signature holes everywhere. The best of the best might be the 18th, a dramatic par 4 that starts high on the hill and then sweeps dramatically to a water-guarded green below. "But my favorite is probably the 12th hole," countered Druzisky of the blind tee shot that must scale a small knoll before it doglegs left to an isolated green below. "I still like to play a little peak-a-boo. It's the charm of golf."

In Laughlin Ranch, Druzisky has given Arizona golfers a virtual magical mystery tour. For instance, the greens are so huge (some more than 10,000 square feet) they require sprinklers on the putting surfaces. The backdrops also are surreal, resembling those found in places like Sedona, Page and Parker, or any place John Ford once made a cowboy movie.

The adventure ends at Laughlin Ranch's ranch-style clubhouse, which is the creation of Scottsdale's Douglas Fredrickson, the same architect who built the clubhouses at Grayhawk and We-Ko-Pa. This one also is a thing of beauty, with a rustic, Old West look that even works in its luxurious spa.

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El Rio doesn't have nearly the perks, but then it's not nearly the price. While Laughlin Ranch charges between \$65 and \$135 depending on the season, it costs \$45 to \$99 for a round at El Rio.

Greg Ellis, the president of Great Golf Management, which oversees El Rio, says that even though his Matt Dye-designed course is piggybacking off the new-found popularity of Laughlin Ranch, "We're a great alternative — a very fun, playable golf course that challenges golfers of all abilities."

Relatively flat and straightforward, El Rio rolls on for 7,115 yards, and incorporates water at the turn (Nos. 8 and 9) and the homestretch (Nos. 17 and 18) to deliver its panache. The mission-styled clubhouse, which boasts expansive views of the Mojave Valley, opens in March.

"We're excited, as is everyone around here," explained Ellis, the former head pro at the TPC of Scottsdale. "Bullhead City and Laughlin might not be a golf mecca yet, but at least now, we're on the map."

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