

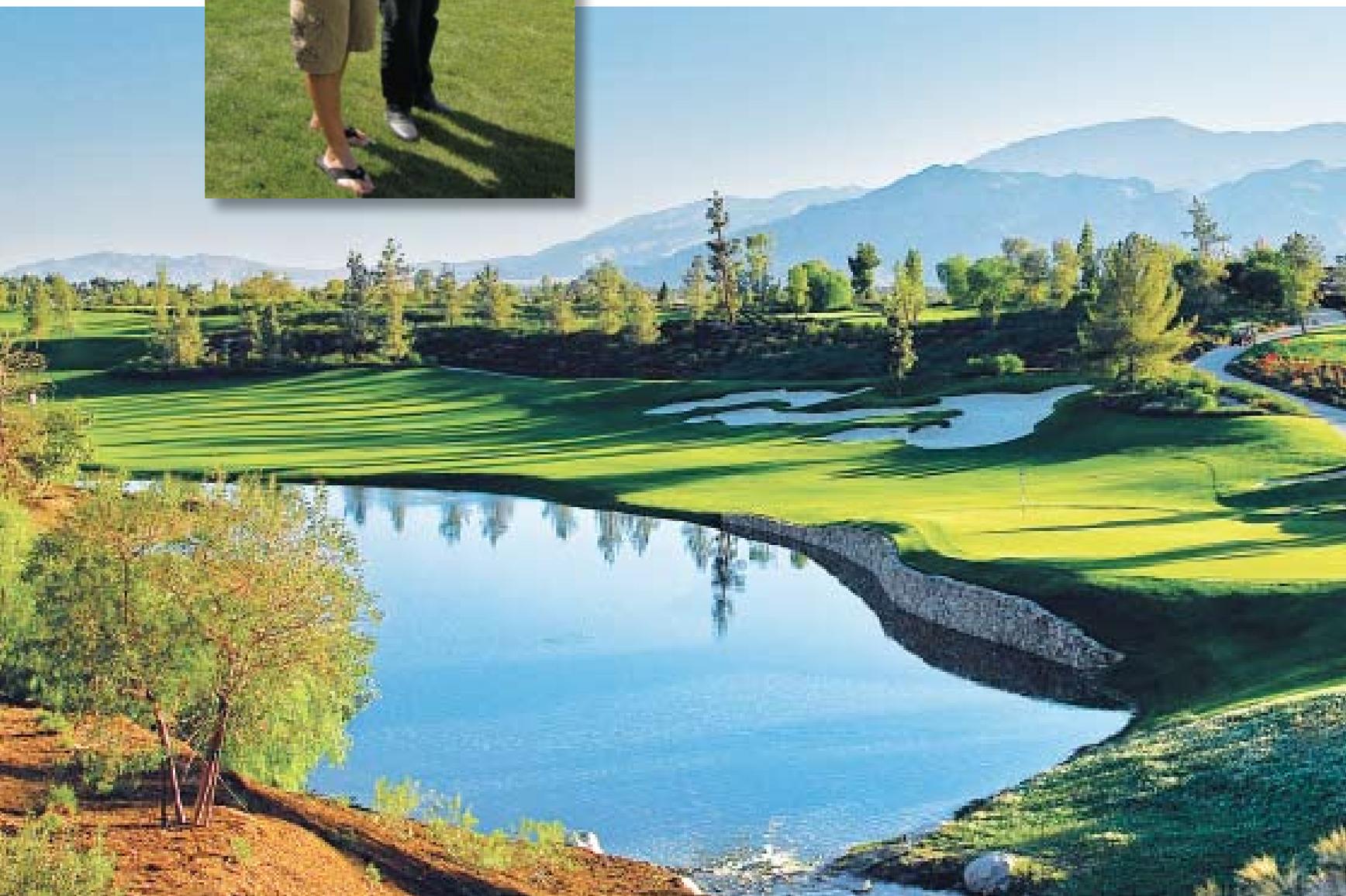
# THE MADISON CLUB

## *Out of the Dust*



Tom Fazio shapes  
a golfer's paradise  
from the untamed  
California desert

BY JOE PASSOV



**F**IRST YOUR JAW DROPS. Then you start shaking your head. Now the grinning starts. You try desperately to remind yourself that you're smack-dab in the middle of the arid desert, but your senses tell you otherwise. Entering the gates at The Madison Club in La Quinta, California, you're greeted by a kaleidoscope of colorful bedded flowers clinging to hillsides and brilliant green fairways draped over rolling terrain. Beyond a rise sits a copse of mature pine trees. It strikes you: Aren't you in the middle of a table-flat piece of barren desert floor? Finally, you let it sink in. The first impression is memorable and incomparable—The Madison Club has no peer.

The Palm Springs area is hardly lacking in great golf. For more than 50 years, the desert has yielded one heralded golf community after the next, each in pursuit of perfection. These days, though, any mention of the words "golf" and "perfection" in the same sentence has to include The Madison Club; its debut in late 2006 set a new benchmark as one of



Far left: Tom Fazio and developer Mike Meldman. Above: The field of The Madison Club before work began (top) and during rough grading. Left: The Madison Club's 18th hole, a 564-yard par 5.

the poshest golf playgrounds on earth.

"We had a great experience at the neighboring Hideaway Golf Club," says Discovery Land Company CEO Mike Meldman, "and while some would say that the Coachella Valley does not need any more golf, we witnessed a big demand for a very-high-end club. Hideaway was so popular that it made sense to try it again, this time from scratch and with the highest possible level of service. We thought, let's try to do something that would set a new



standard—a place where everything is perfect.”

Perfection, however, is a lofty goal. Says Meldman, “It had to start with the golf.” So, of course, he brought in Tom Fazio as the golf course architect. Fazio, a longtime Discovery collaborator, is the most accomplished course designer of the past 25 years. The concept for the Madison course was unique from the beginning. Meldman remembers, “We didn’t want a typical desert golf course.” What would work best, he thought, is a low-key, classic club with a memorable golf course recessed in a valley, with varied topography and lush, very mature landscaping. Two of Los Angeles’ greatest country clubs, Bel-Air and Riviera, sprang to mind. What Meldman and Fazio had to overcome was a dead-flat, mostly featureless stretch of land. They rolled the dice.

“I said to Tom, ‘Let’s do a modern-day Shadow Creek,’ ” says Meldman. And that’s what they did. The layout of the now-legendary Shadow Creek—in the stark desert of North Las Vegas—proved to the world that, with a sufficient budget and imagination, there was no such thing as a bad piece of property. Unveiled in 1990, Fazio’s design for Shadow Creek was invisible to the outside world; but within, the course looked as if it had been airlifted from the North Carolina Mountains, complete with massive pine trees, enormous elevations and gurgling water features. It was completely incongruous with the lifeless terrain surrounding it—and an instant, smash success.

“I’m not sure this concept would work any other place,” says Fazio. “If you’re given a free hand in the Coachella Valley,

what do you do? You do everything. You move the earth, plant the trees, and carve out the streams. You create the entire space. There’s so much here.”

Meldman acknowledges that one of the benefits of this particular site was its absence of distinguishing characteristics. “Normally, when we build a course, there are land and environmental constraints,” says Meldman. “At the very least, there are wetlands issues, riparian corridors, endangered species, rock to blast, and real estate impacts. Here at Madison we didn’t have that. We had sandy soil and few features, so it was a blank canvas from which we could create anything we wanted.”

When you experience The Madison Club, you will see that Fazio took this quite literally. For many of the fairways, Fazio made 50-foot cuts that form greens surrounded by mountains and desert valley—with home sites perched atop surrounding ridges, à la Bel-Air and Riviera. Thus, homeowners enjoy sensational views, both peering down at the lush ribbons of fairway below and also gazing out at the nearby Santa Rosa Mountains beyond. “That’s the benefit of having a tabula rasa,” says Meldman. “Tom was able to design the course perfectly for golf and its interaction with the real estate.”

In terms of the “enchanted valley” design, Meldman sums it up nicely: “When you’ve got a talent like Tom Fazio and you let him pull out whatever he wants from his bag of tricks to apply to a virgin piece of very malleable property—you’ve got a very strong combination.”



Opposite page: A river runs through it—making for a challenging 570-yard par 5 on the 8th. Left: The beautiful color palette on the 7th hole. Lower left: A full bar and an assortment of treats await at the well-stocked comfort station. Above: The guarded entrance to The Madison Club marks the transition from arid desert to lush golf playground.

The course retains an old-world, parkland feel with wall-to-wall grass, making it perfect for member and family play. Fairways are vast, greens and bunkers sprawling, flowers and shrubs ubiquitous. The Madison Club's general manager Mike Abbott observes, "The color palette is stunning. From the thousands of roses to the bougainvillea, we've got an unmatched level of color in the desert. We've got purple and yellow and white and red. With the trees, bunkers, streams, lakes and ponds, it makes for a beautiful picture."

Of course, whether you make a 3 or a 13 on any hole, your spirits will be buoyed by the lemonade stand at the tee or full bar at the comfort stations. Discovery facilities are renowned for their on-course amenities, where unique food and beverage concoctions await, but at The Madison Club, the service level exceeds that of any course on the planet.

At one such stop, the dazzling selection of dried fruits impressed me, but an array of vodka made me positively gleeful, given the fortification required to aim at the back-left flag at 17. From the young men on the range, polishing my clubs as if they were Thanksgiving silver, to the caddie who cheerfully put up with my pulled drives and pushed putts, to the happy-go-lucky fruit stand attendant who bagged me some dried blueberries to go, it became clear that the emphasis on service would have a lasting effect—I'm



now spoiled to the point where everywhere else pales by comparison. Much of the credit for The Madison Club's novel offerings goes to Abbott, whom Meldman calls "the most creative guy in the business."

Some may believe Madison's hugely successful rise from the desert is all about waving a wand and writing a check, but if it were that easy, a whole bunch of folks would have already done it by now. To Tom Fazio, the Discovery approach elevates the property from the pack. "It's totally different from

anything else in the desert," he says. "It's a one-of-a-kind work of art that people want to be a part of. Take some of the other courses I've designed here: Vintage, Quarry, Bighorn, Eldorado. There's no hole at The Madison Club that looks like any of those.

"Everybody in the desert has these spectacular mountain views around you," Fazio adds. "Only here, however, do you get a combination of those views, plus the open spaces, the setting, the movement of the land, the elevation changes, the setting for the homes, the bunkering, the detailing, the flowers, the bridges—plus the DLC service. There isn't one item that isn't done to the *n*th degree."

In other words, The Madison Club is tantalizingly close to achieving that "p" word. Still, give it a little time. After all, it's just celebrating its first birthday.