

Garden of Delights

A day at the Madison Club is an experience
to be savored with all the senses

By Jonathan Abrahams

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The planting of trees alone, like these on the 18th, cost \$10 million.



'There were no compromises,' says Fazio, who moved 5 million cubic yards of dirt and imported 3,500 mature trees to this desert community.

Give a golf course architect a blank slate and a limitless budget, and there's a real danger of ending up with the golf course equivalent of a blinged-out Cadillac Escalade: a towering waterfall here, the longest par 5 in the state there, a mini-volcano, etc. Which is why Tom Fazio deserves some credit for his restraint at the Madison Club in La Quinta, California.

He created a stern but ultimately fair test that feels more like a monument to its members than its developer. And why not: The 225 folks lucky enough to join are required to shell out up to \$5 million for homesites—on top of hefty initiation fees and dues.

Not that the course lacks flashes of extravagance. Madison has massive refrigeration systems buried under each green to cool the heat-hating bentgrass on the putting surfaces that Stimp at 12.

But on the whole, the course is more substance than flash. "We wanted to create something with an old-school feel in the mold of Bel-Air or Riviera," says

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Luxurious touches abound, from leather ball bags to the perfectly manicured par-3 7th.



Michael Meldman, CEO of Discovery Land Company, which developed the 500-acre Madison for a cost of about \$200 million. "If you look at those clubs, the houses are high above the golf course, so not only are the views beautiful, but there's a sense of privacy for residents and golfers."

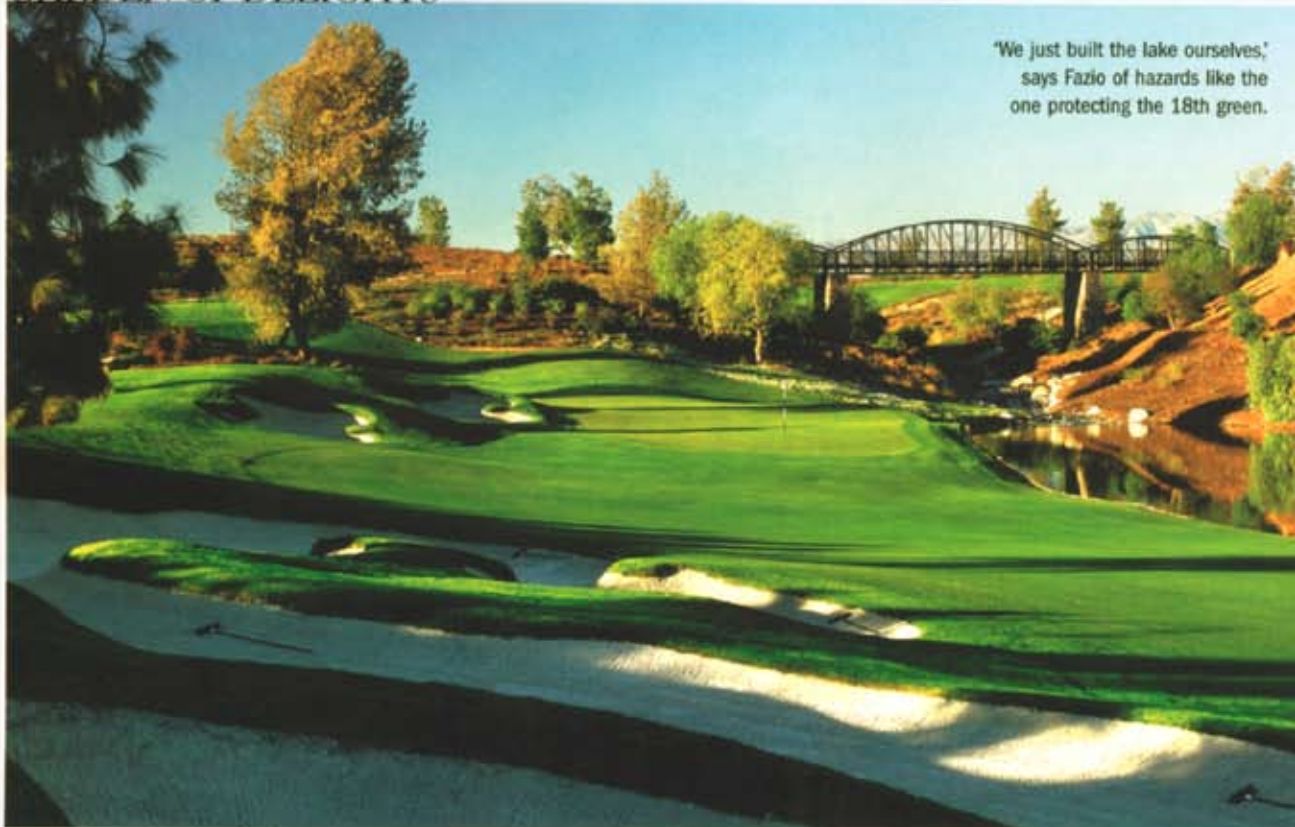
Those L.A. clubs lack desert surroundings—as does Madison, in defiance of its location. Fazio moved more than 5 million cubic yards of dirt and imported 3,500 mature deciduous trees to create a lush, rolling sanctuary. Consider the par-5 18th hole: A creek tumbles down the right side into a tranquil pond. A 50-foot elm guards the narrow, undulating green. Golfers play their approach shots against a backdrop of the snow-capped Santa Rosa mountains and a vintage railroad-style bridge that leads to the classically styled clubhouse, which, when completed, will sit high on a hill. "The idea from the beginning was to make people forget they're playing in the desert," says Meldman.

Fazio received a similar directive when he manifested Shadow Creek Golf Club out of another desert landscape outside Las Vegas in 1989. And yet, because of the residential element of Madison, it was a completely different process. "There will be lots of talk about all the dirt we moved to make this course," says Fazio. "But we began by trying to figure out how much dirt we had to move in order to create 225 outstanding lots."

To do so, Fazio carved a series of huge channels in the desert. The homes are sited between the channels and look over the course, laid out in the shallow canyons below. "It's nice when the native land gives you some hints on what to do, but that also comes with some complicated realities," says Fazio. "You see a lake that you'd like to build a dogleg around, but environmental laws tell you not to do anything within 70 yards of it. So you're making compromises. At Madison, there were no compromises. We just built the lakes ourselves."



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"We just built the lake ourselves," says Fazio of hazards like the one protecting the 18th green.

The menu at the temporary restaurant is simple: If you ask for it, they will make it, from osso bucco to unagi hand rolls to homemade ice cream.

At more than 7,400 yards, Madison challenges every club in the bag without being ridiculously punitive. Fazio's trademark mounding gives the course some receptiveness off the tee, while the undulating, well-bunkered fairways and greens provide obstacles from the approach shot in. Dipping in and around the hillocks and ponds here is a bit like listening to a symphony; there are plenty of beautiful elements, but the combination is what's most memorable. And one tends to forget that it's all man-made.

The subtly orchestrated trio of holes closing out the front nine reflects the entire experience. After a 200-yard carry over water and sand to the par-3 7th tightens the screws, the gently ascending par-5 8th seems to offer options, if not relief. A bubbling brook splits the fairway, creating a narrow chute on the left for those who want to go for the green, and a wider landing area to the right for laying up. Any sense of comfort is fleeting: The maddeningly small, undulated green demands a precise short game.

Fortunately, the par-4 9th presents an opportunity to finish on a high note: At 340 yards from the back tee, it dares the bold to go for the elevated green, protected by a cascade of deep bunkers. The 9th is by no means a breather, but it does offer the possibility of a smooth landing after a difficult stretch.

That said, everything else is ridiculous in the best possible way. A day at Madison is a highly pleasurable assault on the senses, thanks to a long list of amenities that starts on arrival, when valets greet golfers before taking their cars for a full wash. The pro shop has full-time tailors and shoemakers who will design and make custom clothes for members. At the driving range, there is a choice of premium balls picked up by hand to keep the target greens as pristine as the course.

When the construction is finished in the fall of 2008, there will be multiple restaurants, a spa and fitness center, and a pool designed in the mold of the second-be-seen hotspot at the Beverly Hills Hotel. It's Vegas meets the Kennedy

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Bespoke fashion offered by the pro shop allows Madison members to look their best off the course or when playing the 2nd hole, below.



compound, and one gets the sense that if the Rat Pack were still around, they'd hightail it down Highway 111 from Palm Springs and make Madison their joint.

"The Palm Springs area is arguably the Mecca of American golf," says Meldman. "In order to attract the kind of membership we wanted, everything had to be extraordinary."

The quality that truly separates Madison from any other day of golf is the focus on food. Unlike at some prestigious clubs, where members and guests endure turkey sandwiches for the experience of playing the course, the cuisine is so good and so plentiful at Madison that it's hard to determine which makes the more lasting impact.

For example, the first four holes are beautiful and challenging. But before the 5th tee is a "comfort station" that is more like a Bacchanalian feast crammed into a small hut. Aside from any drink imaginable, the offerings include sopressatta, homemade beef jerky made from filet mignon, and something called duck crackle—thick, delicious chunks of marinated duck that clamor for a glass of Chardonnay and a shady spot under an oak tree. (With rarely more than 50 rounds a day, it's unlikely there would be anyone around to object.)

By the time meal No. 1 is digested, golfers arrive at the grill on the 10th tee, where they can fill up on sausage, chicken breast and the traditional burgers and dogs. A few holes later, palates are cleansed at the fresh fruit market, which has, among other things, the most succulent nectarines and pineapples in the desert. Finally, there's a classic homemade lemonade stand at the 17th tee—a hard version is available for those who want to take the edge off a difficult round, or need a little extra courage to tackle the uphill 235-yarder.

The feast doesn't stop when the round is over. Madison's temporary restaurant, a surprisingly luxurious tent/pre-fab structure, features a simple menu: If you ask for it, they will make it, from osso bucco to unagi hand rolls to homemade ice-cream sandwiches and hot, gooey chocolate chunk cookies that are positively narcotic.

While Meldman is the visionary, many details come from general manager Mike Abbott, who has a more pragmatic take on his boss' philosophy: "The truth is, most people get out on the golf course and don't play well," says Abbott. "We just figured we ought to make the experience enjoyable anyway."

Mission accomplished. Golfers who find themselves with an invitation to Madison should not pass it up; it just might be the most enjoyable golf experience money can buy.

