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## Desert Splendor

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It's about time for this

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## ROAD TRIP

# far away, so close

## Wedges and Wine in Walla Walla

BY CRAI BOWER



**HOW OFTEN DO** we hear from our golf buddies about their desert golf exploits, a chance to play in warm temps under sunny skies?

All such sojourns require a flight, rental car, and hotel.

But there is a better way.

Skip the airport and the rental car counter, pack the clubs in the trunk and head east over the Cascades into eastern Washington. You'll find a variety of courses to match Arizona or Palm Springs, have more time to play more golf, and, should you trek to Walla Walla, "reinvest" your savings in prix fixe dinners, hip downtown

accommodations, and another round at the sublime Wine Valley Golf Club.

I love getting behind the wheel and cruising between Northwest golf courses, from the Canadian Okanagan to Bend, Whistler, and, well yes, Bandon. This time I decided to concentrate on eastern Washington, specifically Walla Walla. Having not played since its 2009 opening, I was eager to get back to Wine Valley.

Walla Walla Country Club was the other impetus. I hadn't considered playing the private club until several friends, all members of Seattle area clubs, independently told me they had recently played Walla Walla CC and loved it.

These reciprocal playing rights embellish an already awesome romantic, buddy, or girlfriend trip. An invitation to play the classic 1923 parkland track also meant I would have to save Pullman's Palouse Ridge for my next excursion.



*Left: One more tasting at Yellowhawk Resort.*

*Above: Walla Walla C.C. member Derek launching another 300+-yard drive.*



*Below: Abeja's converted homestead is ideal for group or romantic golf outing.*



*All photos by Crai Bower*

*Stone Creek is aptly named for stoning approaches to the 16th*



*Wine Valley's browed bunkers burrow deep to test your yardages, as does the wind.*

One of the best reasons to road-trip east of the Cascades is the nearly countless itineraries you can create to suit your golfing whims. I was working Walla Walla into a weekend, so was limited in where else I could play. If I'd had a couple more days I might add an extension to Pullman and then draw in Circling Raven in northern Idaho for 36.

A special occasion might call for a visit to Coeur d'Alene Resort Golf Course, but I digress.

I enter Walla Walla at 7:00pm on Friday but continue four miles east to the Inn at Abeja, a converted farmstead that has elevated the lodging options significantly. The clapboard farmhouse, cabins, and suites blend a bucolic aesthetic with contemporary furnishings that feel both intimate for a couple's weekend and expansive for a group golf getaway.

Abeja and Wine Valley are working on a future partnership, an alliance that will no doubt result in luxurious stay-and-play packages.

I rise early Saturday morning to catch Wine Valley just past sunrise and the temperature at a level amenable to a five-mile, 20-story walk through the wine webs. Like Abeja's 2019 Cab Franc, Dan Hixson's design remains in rarefied company, a must-play blend of 18 exquisite holes with few peers in the state.

The moment you watch your drive roll endlessly down

the first fairway and climb after your wedge to the green you realize you're playing a very special layout. I play a lot of courses solo, but my favorite tracks always feel like a foursome would feel equally solitary, an opportunity to escape every other facet of existence and concentrate on your next shot and your friendships.

Like the best links courses on the planet, there is no signature hole at Wine Valley, every tee box revealing a hole as joyful as the last and as interesting as the next.

After my rare sub-80 round I relocate to The Finch, Walla Walla's newest and funkiest boutique hotel. The Finch portrays a road motel in redux, a vibe that is part ski hostel (see the outside lobby fire pit) and swank hotel more suited for Stockholm.

It's also one block off East Main Street, which is bustling with restaurant terraces, tasting rooms, shops, and visitors. On my Whitman College-grad nephew's recommendation, I head straight to AK Mercado's, where chef-owner and former Seattle food truck



*The E. Main Street sidewalk is a fairway of perfect terraces.*



*Sampling the summer ales at the new Crosscub Brewery before dinner.*



*The Wine Valley rough is natural and, um, punitive.*

pioneer, Andrae Bopp, has merged Mexican street food with N'Awlins flair.

To say Walla Walla is booming would be an understatement. What happened to the prison and onions? Wineries continue to emerge.

Local legend, WSU and NFL quarterback Drew Bledsoe has returned home to open Doubleback Winery. There's also a Bledsoe Family Winery tasting room on E. Main.

I also venture out to Yellowhawk Resort, an 84-acre property that will soon feature vineyard-side cabins, a tasting room, and a restaurant. For dinner, I check out Walla Walla Steak Co., a "blue jean steakhouse" that feels like a cross between Jackson Hole and Manhattan, especially when "The Hatchet," a 34oz bone-in prime ribeye rolls right on past to be carved tableside.



*Nice when the short game pays off.*

My Walla Walla wonderment continues the next morning when I pull into the perfectly manicured Walla Walla Country Club. The town's ascendance - see all the Gulfstreams parked at the airport - is summed up by a member who finally got off the waitlist here. His other memberships? Pine Valley and Augusta National.

I play (not very well) with an obsessive who "plays poorly" and shoots a 69 with two eagles, and Cliff, a local legend who, at 88-years young, also plays from the 6,600-yard tips and always shoots below his age, as he did on this day.

The course itself lays out quietly with a few startling elevation changes and plenty of old oaks to keep players on the straight and narrow. A creek meanders across holes two, five, six and 17 in all the wrong places, and especially on the 432-yd 16th, where the creek fronts the green, a steep embankment punishing any short approach, including mine.

My driver, my BFF but 24 hours ago, decides to play "pop-up goes the weasel" of a tee-shot today and, though I abandon Cliff to the tips after the first hole, I barely break 90 on a course that, unlike my scorecard, is blemish-free.

Before I can make any more excuses to my playing partners, I am off on a drive I can handle towards Seattle. I stop at the Roslyn Café for an early dinner, contemplating why, if it's so easy to open one more bottle of Abeja's 2020 Beekeeper's Rosé, it's often so difficult to uncork a decent drive.