

URBAN

*Fresh from a Texas-style facelift, the **Four Seasons Las Colinas** is the premier resort destination in Big D*

BY BRIAN McCALLEN

exas is a great place to play golf. Just ask the Texans, who give New Yorkers a run for their money as the least shy and most extroverted folks in the nation.

There is a notable exception to typical Lone Star grandiosity: Byron Nelson, winner of 52 PGA Tour events. A native of Fort Worth, the soft-spoken Nelson, who was once an assistant pro at Ridgewood Country Club in Paramus, New Jersey, and won the 1936 Met Open at Quaker Ridge, was as humble as any champion in the game's history. Nelson gladly lent his name to a PGA Tour event that has been played in and around Dallas since 1968 and which moved to the new Tournament Players Club at Las Colinas (Spanish for "the little hills") in 1986. Nelson passed away in 2006. In a way, so did the course.

Originally designed by Jay Morrish, with Nelson and Ben Crenshaw serving as consultants, the golf course had become tired and disjointed over time. Members, as well as guests of the Four Seasons Resort on-site, began to grumble about course conditions. In addition, at 6,800 yards, the course simply wasn't long enough to test the game's top players. In the span of 20 years, the layout, despite several well-intentioned modifications, had become all hat, no cattle.

The club's setting, a 400-acre corporate greenbelt a mere 15 minutes from Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, is a weary traveler's dream come true. Though heavy on civilization's reminders — jumbo jets taking off, tall glass towers rising from the perimeter — the ambience at this stylish resort is pleasant and welcoming. Thanks to a major renovation, the golf course, reopened this spring, is now better than when it was considered one of the nation's finest public-access TPC tracks.

Cowboy

The proximity of the TPC Course to nearby skyscrapers is evident from the two-tiered green on the 7th hole, which provides picturesque views.

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The Sports Center (inset) provides both shade and comfort for weary golfers. The eighth hole at Cottonwood Valley (above, right) plays downhill to a well-guarded green.



The Golf

To bring the course up to speed, area resident and Champions Tour regular D.A. Weibring, who lists Nelson as a mentor, brought in his Golf Resources Group to direct an \$8 million course makeover. His mandate was clear: develop a more challenging and enjoyable course for the Tour pros and amateurs alike. “We tried to protect what was good about the course and enhance the rest,” Weibring said. He noted that while the original routing

was retained, every tee, fairway and green was reworked. Many of the subtly contoured greens, each surfaced in bentgrass, are now embraced by broad, close-cropped swales and runoffs to provide short-game options. Greenside spectator mounds were softened to appear more naturalistic, five holes were lengthened (the third and 15th holes, both par fours, now stretch to more than 500 yards from the tips), and driving angles were improved at holes that used to have many players scratching their heads. Finally, nearly 400 trees were removed or relocated to improve both strategic options and course aesthetics.

A par-70 layout with only two par fives, the TPC at Las Colinas looks like easy pickings on the scorecard. It isn't. While sporty from the member tees at 5,916 yards, the layout can prove testing from the next set at 6,583 yards and is downright hellacious from the championship markers at 7,157 yards.

The TPC hangs its Stetson on a fine and varied collection of par fours. Among the more memorable two-shotters is the third, a long, narrow hole with a channel of water up the right side. A daunting 456 yards (from the member tees!), the hole was designed to be played downwind. The prevailing breeze in Texas blows from the south, but the wind in these parts tends to gust and swirl from all directions. Into the wind, reaching this green in regulation borders on the impossible for all but the longest hitters.

Weibring significantly fine-tuned the short par-four 11th, one of the more interesting holes on the back nine. The hole is well with-

in range for big hitters from back tees ranging from 312 to 327 yards, but water in play up the entire left side gives even go-for-broke enthusiasts pause for thought. The green is tucked behind a bend in the river and is guarded by well-positioned bunkers.

The most noticeable change on the TPC is found on the par-four 18th, a dramatic finishing hole that climbs a hill and swings gently to the left past a series of four ponds. These ponds, which extend from the left side of the landing area to the front of the green, are connected by a series of small waterfalls. Not quite Vegas, but a lovely oasis nonetheless.

Like the course itself, the resort's practice facility and short game center have been expanded and rebuilt. If it's game improvement you're after, the Byron Nelson Golf School offers excellent, personalized instruction and facilities.

More golf? Resort guests have limited access to Cottonwood Valley, a private club adjacent to the TPC that completed a \$2 million renovation by Jay Morrish last summer. Cottonwood Valley is used as the second course for the first two rounds of the EDS Byron Nelson Championship.

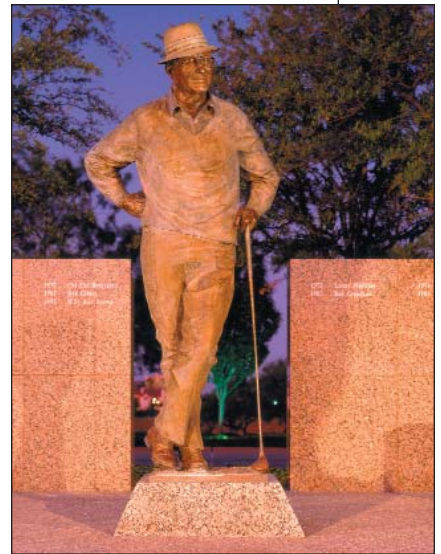
golf course and the beautifully landscaped grounds.

For those fresh from the Sports Club, alternative cuisine (low-fat, low-cholesterol meals) is available in the hotel's dining rooms. Café on the Green, set above the villas and resort pool, offers sophisticated, contemporary American fare from breakfast through dinner. It's a short walk from the café to the large bronze statue of the late Byron Nelson situated near the first tee, a place golfers are known to gather to honor the modest rancher who won 11 straight on Tour.

The Trip

The resort is located in Irving, Texas, a mere seven miles from one of the busiest and most centrally located airports in America. Several major carriers service Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport with direct flights from the Met Area. If you go, ask about the Champions Golf Package, which offers discounted rates from Thursday to Sunday. For information and details, visit www.fourseasons.com or call 972-717-0700. ■

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A statue of the legendary Byron Nelson greets golfers as they approach the first tee.

Insider's Edge

The one shot you need: A Texas wedge for those tricky shots around the greens.

Best chance for a birdie: Par-five seventh, 462 yards from member tees, plays uphill but is relatively trouble-free.

Toughest hole: From the tips at 528 yards, the third may be toughest two-shotter in Texas. No picnic either from the middle markers at 464. Call it a par 4½.

Cart it or hoof it? Walking is permitted, but few guests take advantage. Even so, the compact, gently rolling course is a pleasant walk if it's not too hot.

Best time to visit: Spring and fall. Keep in mind that this year's EDS Byron Nelson Championship week is April 21–27.

Don't leave home without: Your hand-tooled boots and wide-brimmed hat.

Nicest touch: Complimentary yoga, Pilates, weight training and water aerobics classes in the Sports Club.

Best drinks: Tasty margaritas and superb selection of wines in Café on the Green, where sommelier James Tidwell is a certified wine educator and local wine celebrity.

Worthwhile souvenirs: Autographed Byron Nelson biography with postscript in golf shop. Serious shoppers can head to The Galleria, Dallas's premier upscale shopping mall located 20 minutes from resort.

Don't miss: Hall of Champions promenade near pro shop, which houses much of Byron Nelson's golf memorabilia; 19, a cozy new sports lounge by the resort pool.

The Resort

Quality-wise, the TPC course is now a match for the companion Four Seasons Resort, with its undulating, multicolored brick façade and Spanish colonial-style arches in view beyond the 18th green. For anyone doing business or seeking relaxation in the Big D, this stylish and elegant hotel, which also offers 90 deluxe villas and has 34 more on the way, is the address of choice. In addition to the golf complex, the resort's signature amenity is the adjacent 176,000-square-foot Sports Club, one of the largest and best-equipped facilities of its kind in the nation. The club features a full-service spa with 17 treatment rooms, indoor and outdoor pools, running tracks, a racquet center (tennis, racquetball and squash), a half-court basketball gym and a wide assortment of the latest cardiovascular and weight-training equipment.

The hotel's guest rooms, accented by marble bathrooms with twin vanities, a glass-walled stall shower and an oversize tub, are exceedingly comfortable. Rooms, all with private balconies or patios, overlook the

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