

Rustic Canyon Golf Course **Moonpark, California**

Architect: Gil Hanse (2002)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
Blue	72	6634	71.6	128
Hanse	72	6390	70.4	126
White	72	6049	69	122
Red	72	5275	65.3	112

Overview:

Every once in a while you trip over a unique golf course, one that does not fit into any of the neat categories of course design. Rustic Canyon is one of those, a blend of links design with an arid desert course feel. Created by Gil Hanse with the help of long time associate Jim Wagner and golf writer Geoff Shackelford the course was built on flat firm, sandy turf in a two-mile long arroyo between dusty foothills about 40 miles north of the Los Angeles sprawl.

At first glance the land must have seemed ill suited for golf, but credit the imagination of these three guys to come up with a rough-edged “rustic design” to delight and challenge golfers of all abilities. A dry wash full of distinctive desert vegetation and scrub dominates the center of the property and provides most of the hazards the golfers will encounter. With wide open fairways, an absence of trees, no rough to speak of, natural desert hazards complimented with a limited number of Wagnerian thick-lipped jagged edged bunkers, and no man-made water in play, they used a minimalist approach to integrate natural beauty and topographical nuance into an almost intoxicating golf experience.

Taking a page from the links formula of course design they created holes using broad fairways and angled proximity to the natural hazards coupled with wide, flowing, and uncluttered green complexes. There is a vague similarity to what Hanse did seven years later at Castle Stuart Golf Links where he built a user-friendly links course with wide driving areas and strategic approach lines on stretches of rolling terraced land overlooking the Moray Firth in Inverness, Scotland.

As you often see in the British Isles these green complexes, many of which the surrounds blend seamlessly into the green surfaces, encourage ground approaches. Depending on wind direction and pin positions each day this makes for an inherent variety of strategic approaches. Managing one’s way successfully around this place takes a links mentality where every shot requires proper consideration of how it affects the next shot. This means at times one must temper aggressive instincts and allow the flow of the course to dictate the proper and efficient way to play.

The first order of business was that Rustic Canyon be assembled as a municipal facility to serve golfers of every ilk in Ventura County and the greens fee had to be quite reasonable. The driving range, short game area, and practice putting green are modest but adequate to provide players a proper stage prepare for the day. Golf carts are outfitted with a rudimentary GPS system that can be very helpful considering that the lack of

trees makes depth perception an enigma and visual distancing a challenge. The course is walker friendly with hand carts available and there is a pricey hand drawn minimalist yardage book that can be helpful as well. The yardage book is done in the style of the touring professional so it has all the real detail a thinking player needs without the glossy window dressing. But honestly you have to be of a particular mindset to find this yardage book user friendly.

With four sets of tees on the scorecard there is a distance to present the appropriate challenge for every handicap. You will note that there is a peculiar fifth choice, the Hanse tees, that is actually a Pu Pu Platter of holes from the Black, Blue, and White Tees. It makes for a wonderful 6400 yard challenge if one thinks the Blue Tees at 6634 is more than they can chew. Playing the Hanse tee you have to pay attention to the Hanse scorecard yardage for each hole to see which color tee to play on that hole. The shorter holes are often played from the Black Tees which satisfies the perverse macho element in most of us-that in itself makes for an interesting twist.

The opening hole is a perfect example of the design characteristics you will see all day. Standing on the tee of this five par the harrowing bunker on the right makes the driving area appear seriously constrained whereas it actually widens past the bunker to almost 70 yards of width and a warm welcome for almost any drive. In spite of this wide driving berth, position is very important depending on how you will negotiate the dry bed fissure on your second shot that bisects the last 140 yards of the fairway into the green. For a bump and run approach shot into the green, the second shot needs to be played from the left side of the driving area deftly into the narrow channel of mown fairway grass left of the fissure. Up the right off the tee allows for a longer second shot lay up to a more open area closer to the green but what is left will be a lawn dart pitching club across the hazard to a green steeply pitched toward you. If the pin is on the front right this can be a difficult approach and putt to negotiate. Throughout the day these types of decisions have to be anticipated so it is a matter of knowing where the pin is located and plotting an approach path that is appropriate.

Further study of the scorecard reveal quirky hole yardages and hole sequencing that is equally intriguing. The front nine has three par 3s and three par 5s with all the par threes coming in a five hole sequence. In the links tradition the three pars have great variety from longer semi-blind approaches to large sprawling greens to short pitches to small greens surrounded by deep sand pots or nasty grass hollows. Throw in a two very imaginative short par fours on the outward nine and you are playing an a collection of finesse holes where length is of little advantage.

As you make the turn sequential technical par 5s on nine and ten followed by another on thirteen provide good scoring chances in the second leg of your Nassau bet. The heart and soul of the back side are three long and challenging par 4s which set an entirely different cadence for the way in. To further complicate matters the routing keeps you off balance as the hole directions switchback five times on the back nine. With any prevailing North/South wind down the valley this will wreak havoc on your swing rhythm and force you to play differing trajectory controlled shots on every hole.

It is hard to imagine as you walk the course that there is actually a 240 foot drop in the property as it works from the top of the valley to the bottom. The last change in direction on the sixteenth tee will release you on a downhill ramp that stretches the rest of the way to the clubhouse. This makes for three of the most majestic holes you play all day but the increment of club selection adjustment can be astounding, especially if the wind is at your back. Ground control to major Tom.....it is the only way to control the approaches into the last three greens.

The Hanse crew was determined to create a rustic golf experience with the natural design feel of the architects of the Golden Age of Design who could not move large quantities of dirt to make a superb golf holes. Honoring that tradition, Rustic Canyon requires thoughtful play with strategic agility. The satisfying feeling of mental exhaustion one gets from negotiating the vagaries of a classic design is something to reflect on long after the Rustic Canyon experience is done.

Hole-By-Hole Analysis (Blue/Hanse):

#1 Par 5 512/512 yards

The landing area on the first hole opens up beyond the bunker into one of the widest fairways on the course which is cusped to center to keep balls from wandering through the fairway. I like a strong one over the left corner of the fairway bunker which will give you the full width the architects intended. The decision making is on the second where to lay up in relation to the fault line (a dry desert burn) that begins at 140 on the left and cuts across the fairway wrapping around the right side of the green. From the right it can be a spinning wedge into a green that leans toward you just over the fault. Dare to lay up across the burn on the left and you can leave a simple pitch and run up the heart of the green. Not sure there is much sense in the second choice this early in the round. The theme of natural hazards and sparse bunkering is established early.

#2 Par 4 443/424

This is a challenging par four set against the hills that plays to a 4.75 to me, just play smart and walk off the green with a five. If the wind direction makes this green reachable then you want to drive it down the left and take on the OB stakes on that side. This will give you a clear path for a long club to the putting surface. On a normal day a drive up the right leaves an obscured view of the green over a bunker complex about 50 yards short of the green but you can play a lay up hybrid or fairway metal back into the space left of this bunker for a straight on pitch and run approach from there. As you will see throughout the day this green complex has a huge apron surround which will accept low approaches gracefully. There is a high point in the center of the green that will disperse the ball to any side but it mostly leans right to left.

#3 Par 4 308/315

The three short four pars are what I believe give this course its unique character. For the most part unless the wind is favoring these holes are not drivable for mere mortals but they do make you choose your arrows carefully. Safe play is right of the hazard complex about 210 which sets up an optimal angle back into the long green set to the left. Taking on the left side of the furry mounds off the tee would leave a straight low level approach but that area seems to me a very small target off the tee. To make a birdie you have to take on the pin but be aware that the flanking bunker left of the green is a 7.5 nasty on a scale of 10 and over leaves you with a hard elevation pitch back down the slope of the green.

#4 Par 3 152/166

This course presents unusual sequences of the holes that keep you off balance. This is the first of three par threes over the next five holes and has a bit of hide and seek in it. If you love links golf you will recognize this hole arrangement with fondness. A short to middle iron is played semi-blindly over a furry berm to an open green sitting on a 4 to 10 o'clock angle to the tee. The shoulder pads on the right will feed an approach left and onto the front third of the green. The entire green banks toward you and to the right so I like the right-to-left curve working into that tendency. Another high spot in the front right makes for some slick putting from the high areas back left to the lowest point front right.

#5 Par 5 545/545

If you liked the opening sequence you will love this next "fly like a butterfly sting like a bee" stanza. It begins with a segmented three-shot hole that shares playing area at the back end with the second hole in a true Dornoch tradition. Wide open driving area where placement right center will give you the best set of options. The decision making is on your approach line and aggressiveness as the second shot crosses the dry wash and you must decide how much to take on. Knowing the pin of the day will help clarify this decision. Going for the green in two up the left is doable but the leave if you miss is a very difficult elevation pitch up a steep left front to a side table green arrangement. If the pin is on the right then the lay up is well right just short of a pot bunker at 50 yards just left of the nasty bunker complex short of the 2nd green. This leaves you a straight approach angle to the table top that won't require you to carry the ridge that creates the false front left. Got all that? Just don't wander left or you have that same feat of a two-story recovery pitch. The designers provided a convenient pitching area long that will come into play if you go after a back pin. Playing this is a hole that requires a great deal of forethought to say the least.

#6 Par 3 200/128

The Hanse/Blue Tee balance tips in Hanse's favor on this next one where it is a short iron pitch rather than a fairway metal from the blue tee. From the Hanse it is a short pitch from a lovely veranda tee setting across unfettered ground to a receptive cusped green slightly below. The green leans away from the foothills on the right so anything landing on the right front side will feed to center and left. A small high area middle left will dampen that effect nicely. As it is with most of the par threes the challenge is not getting to the green but in negotiating the very tricky contours once you get there.

#7 Par 4 338/338

Back to flying like a butterfly this is the second of the intriguing short four pars. If you have a carry of 220 yards in the air to clear the wash it will leave a simple pitch to any pin location. For most of us the 200 yard play up the left short of the wash is safer but leaves an obstructed view across a mean face pit to a raised green flanked by fall offs to the right and a few Scottish pot bunkers. The approach is best made with a right to left curve working up the throat. Any wind across from the left or in your face will make this a very difficult task. Just love this hole, the factor of difficulty on the approach is at least one and half times what it appears from where you are standing in the fairway.

#8 Par 3 117/127

The next short one is a piece of Ireland, just an engaging little hole that will have you scratching your head when you walk off the back of the green without a par or better. Everything is right in front of you, a carry across the native brownery and a couple of nasty bunkers short and left. The steep front short right makes it absolutely necessary to carry the approach all the way to the putting surface. They have provided a nice back wall on that side that will feed your shot left and back toward the center of the green, so that is your aiming line for most pins. If the prevailing wind is at you then lowering the trajectory of your approach is necessary and no easy task. Watching the lyrical flight of this approach is something from a NatGeo documentary.

#9 Par 5 518/509

The outward half finishes with an almost mundane appearing par five. Beware, they are lulling you into a false sense of security as the hole narrows precipitously in the final third and the approach to green complex is very difficult to negotiate even on the ground. This is the first of three five pars over the a five hole stretch so scoring opportunity is lurking. The approach angle for the third depends on the pin location of the day. If the pin is on the upper tier you want to lay up well to the right almost in the first fairway, while a pin on the lower tier would favor a ground control approach straight on. Drive to center and then play the second about 200 yards to an attack distance on the aggressive line for the day's pin. One pot bunker at 90 yards helps segment that choice for you. Green has an oversized apron with no bunkers but severe slope from back right to low areas front left. A bounding approach shot would have the best chance of ending up with the uphill putt you want for another chance to sting like a bee.

#10 Par 5 546/571

This truncated fairway gives you the appearance of lots of room for the drive but the bunker constellation that defines the end of the fairway bevels off the fairway to the right giving the long shot more roll out the farther right it goes. A pot at about 240 from the blue is tucked on the right to make squeezing a little more somewhat of a gamble. From the center of the fairway the hole now bends to the right with bunkering cordoning the right and the wash threatening the left. Lay up to an attack distance on the right to get the best angle to a long rectangular putting surface referred to affectionately as "the lap pool". A small plume of native vegetation was left in left center of the fairway at about 75 yards, nice visual. The best approach is probably a low bouncing one up the shallow end of the pool, they provide a bail out chipping area left of lane number one. Anything missing right will have a sand recovery from another series of bunkers bordering the entire length of the green.

#11 Par 4 430/382

The distinct change in character on the inward nine is defined by the three long par fours you have to negotiate. Only salvation may be if the wind is down canyon it will mitigate the length of two out of three. This long hole continues to work up the canyon with the wash on the left. The closer the drive is to the wash the shorter the approach and the best look up to the green tucked slightly to the left against a major sand element flanking the last 120 yards of the hole. Drive to left center and then try to thread one up the throat between the two bunkers on right and the previously mentioned monster on the left. For grins a ridge runs up the center spine creating two distinct putting chambers on this heart shaped green. Good news is the heart leans toward you.

#12 Par 4 325/325

A quick switchback in direction and length just to keep you off balance. Confusing in it's simplicity-the hole provides no visual cues on how to best play it. No real hazards in front of you but there is OB wide left and another fissure full of sand down the left of the second half of the hole. My preference is about 220ish aimed right center to get an angle back at a ramped tiered green leaning toward you on a 4 to 10 angle. The top plateau is hard to hold so pins back there are best negotiated with a low trajectory approach. Missing long will give you that dicey elevation pitch back down the slope. Anything missing left is ringing the scorecard cash register.

#13 Par 5 546/512

About face....this next five par plays back up the canyon. The flatness of the rustic terrain set against the high foot hills brings to mind images of the look and feel of Old MacDonald at Bandon Dunes. The OB right should not be an issue but the driving area is bit tighter than it appears because the favored side is up the right where a lone pot bunker about 200 out that creates a narrow neck of safe ground on that side. The layup position is key and is dictated by the day's pin on a boomerang shaped green wrapping around a deep center bunker. The more the hole positions moves from right to left around that bunker the approach lay up position has to shift dramatically. Pin on the right of the bunker the approach is well up the right. Pin on the left the approach flips the optimum approach line 50 yards to the left. The green itself is like a sting ray swimming at you, the center spine is right behind the front bunker and the contour of the flows back to front and away from the spine. If you are in the good lay up position the low punch and run is your best method for getting close.

#14 Par 4 446/364

For the third time in three holes you are switching directions for this eye candy par four. From the back tees the drive carries over the Environmentally Sensitive Area (i.e. the scrub and brush) with the wash now on your left to a fairway that banks off the foot hills on the right. Hit it hard at the fairway bunker you see through the fairway on the right and let the ground hook turn it up the hole. At about 160 the hole turns to the left around a long bunker and heads up the hill to a bunkerless green arrangement with a generous apron. The green complex is long and narrow and tilts back at you. A right to left shot using the right apron to feed it up the green will do. The steep drop off to a bunker and the wash left of the green is an unforced error to avoid.

#15 Par 3 138/147

Hole sequence once again will confound you with two par threes in the last four holes, both of which can present good scoring opportunities. The first one is ramped up slightly from a low tee to a natural green sitting on a shelf in the adjacent foot hill. The anvil shaped green has three distinct tiers, the center one is barely deep enough for you to lie across sideways with your arms tuck to your side. This is a low trajectory skipper short iron that hits, hops a tier, and stops in the hole position segment of the day. You should not end up there but there are two nasty pot bunkers right and below the putting surface as well as a long flanking bunker shadowing the left side of the green.

#16 Par 4 466/466

Possibly one of the coolest holes you play all day this is a testimony to minimalist design. Once they staked the tee boxes in the high hills a log flume ride to the green below was just a matter of mowing a fairway and letting the players have at it. Heading back down canyon this is a monster par 4 on the card but plays two to three clubs less over the two shots because of the steep drop from tee to green and possibly a helping down canyon wind. With 65 yards of fairway width below just hit a hard draw down the right and let gravity and topography do the work. What is left is 200 plus that will play 180 as the ball will continue to trundle down the steep terrain toward a shallow green below. The bunker constellation about 65 yards from the green is the only no-no so a strong fade working around it would be the shot of preference. With another wide berth apron surrounding the green you are likely pitching and putting for par.

#17 Par 3 161/189

A stunning downhill three par that looks like it was there before the designers arrived. From a high tee position this is a majestic carry across a Robert Trent Jones angled bunker complex set diagonally to the line of the green. More right you go the more hazard you have to carry. There is a big bail area to the left so it sets up for a fade starting on the left edge of the green working to the hills. In spite of the hillside to the right of this green the green actually tilts into the hillside which will puzzle you when it gets to reading your putting lines. Walk off with a three here and your self esteem meter will be approaching a 8.

#18 Par 4 437/354

The downhill theme three of the last four continues with a sweeping dog ear right that falls gently from tee to green. With ESA and bunker on the right of the driving area I like a left to right drive that starts at the two bunkers on the left of the fairway. What is left is a club less down the slope to a funnel green below you that is actually the back half of the practice putting ground. An approach that lands on the front will vending machine feed to center and toward the back so judging the flag position relative to the first bounce is important. This is a very satisfying finish to what should have been a wonderful and fair challenge of strategic golf.