

**Desert Willow Firecliff Course
Palm Desert, California**

Designer: Michael Hurdzan (1997)

| Tees | Par | Yardage | Rating | Slope |
|-------|-----|---------|--------|-------|
| Black | 72 | 7056 | 73.6 | 138 |
| Blue | 72 | 6676 | 71.7 | 133 |
| White | 72 | 6173 | 69.3 | 124 |

Overview:

The Firecliff Course at Desert Willow is a desert layout as pleasing as any you will ever lay your eyes on. Hurdzan did a marvelous job creating holes with a desert flavor that is not Arizona target golf. Palm Desert may be an arid flat pancake but you would not know it after the four hours you spend playing this course. The bulldozers had their way raising topography from the desert that is lyric and pleasing to the eye. The landscape artist must have been paid a bundle because there are astonishing compositions of desert flora that surrounds every tee, fairway, and green. Bring your digital camera and a large storage card because you are coming home with a load of photographic memories for the family scrapbook.

These holes have topographical character of a foothills mountain course even though the mountains are miles away. Well positioned every tee box gives a full view of the challenge ahead. There is an insane amount of bunkers and waste areas full of desert nasties but if you control your shot lines it is a negotiable challenge.

A master of obfuscation Hurdzan did a great job in masking the severity of challenge throughout the holes. The short holes are deceitfully difficult and the long holes have plenty of give to them. This is a course where you must plot your path on each hole carefully to mitigate the risk of pummeling your scorecard but there are times when a bold shot can give you a chance for a pleasing result to brag about over dinner.

The slope of 133 from the Blue markers is real but the 6700 yards itself is not overwhelming. I noticed that often the upslope in the landing areas off the tees can steal some roll out especially on the back side where there is a more rolling topography. The green complexes are ingenious, many perched on hills or ledged over waste areas or bunkers so getting a proper angle of approach is very important. On average the greens are small with sweeping shoulder slopes not tiers so you will spend a good part of the day scratching your head wondering why approach shots continue to separate from the flag.

The lush surrounds of the first tee box sets the stage for the day. A beautiful sweeping par five stretches out in front of you ambling up to a green set in a hollow beautifully appointed by desert vegetation. Another stunning view off the tee box on the second is framed by the towering mountains that surround the Sonoran Desert. The terrarium adjacent to this green and the carry wilderness on the Par 3 third are a signature look for the Firecliff Course.

The pace of the challenge ramps up quickly with back-to-back strong four pars on the fourth and fifth. These are holes with lots of trouble encroaching on the sides but controlled lines make them eminently playable. The short Par 4 sixth is where the large number lurks. After a position fairway metal off the tee the peninsula green

setting and sharply sloped putting surface is an ice bucket challenge if you get too ambitious on your approach. Next is a roller coaster Par 5 that should not present any real threat to the scorecard but what follows to the turn will test your patience.

The Par 3 penultimate holes on each side share the astonishing surrounds of what looks like Gilligan's lagoon. The 8th is a mere short iron across the hazard to a green set in front of majestic palms and beautifully landscaped sand and flora. This visual is more than distracting so try to keep your focus.

The view going down the 9th and 18th is equally engaging with the clubhouse high above the green complexes reminiscent of the finish at Grayhawk in Scottsdale. Water of the left impinges the long approach shot to a narrow green opening so prudent course management may call for a lay up for a pitch and a putt to keep the momentum going.

Grab a wrap and a protein bar from the snack area in the clubhouse because an awesome stretch of holes are awaiting. The view off the 10th tee is another jaw dropper as a difficult long Par 4 climbs a ramped hill to a table top green complex. With a long club in hand the abrupt slope to the green will reject timid approach shots so do not hold back. The 11th is another long Par 4 with a blinded carry tee shot over the desert wilderness. This leaves a long approach to a green complex parsed from the side hills by deep grassy depressions on each side. A bogey-bogey start on this side is not something to be worried about.

After a drive into the upslope of the fairway on #12 you are left with an intimidating carry across a massive sea of sand and waste to the green perched on a hill. This is another Kodak moment-you could swear you are in Hawaii and the blue Pacific is just beyond the green.

Two of the more visual holes of the day follow in a Par 5 and Par 3 respectively. The look up the long 13th is inspiring and intimidating. This is a hole where you have to pick a line and trust it because it is much more user friendly than it appears to the eye. The subtle 14th is a soothing alcove green setting with a large desert accent up the left. You may just want to get into the lotus position on this tee box and chant your mantra for about 20 minutes to settle the mind for the challenging stretch to the house..

At first glance the short Par 4 on #15 appears innocuous but negotiating the approach or up and down save into a precipice green with a small pachyderm buried in the back left corner is fraught with difficulty. A piece of Pine Valley follows on the sand scary 16th which has serpentine sand pit covering the last 50 yards left and shrouding the green.

Returning for a second taste of Gilligan's lagoon on 17 the longer length of the club in your hand makes it incrementally more difficult. Once again don't get lost in admiring the surrounds because this is a very hard long iron or hybrid to hold on line to the diagonal setting of the green.

The play down the last is a perfect conclusion to a thrilling round of golf. A truncated Par 5 that threatens both your second and third shot can be a real thriller if the back nine Nassau depends on you making par or better. Try to ignore all those people on the clubhouse patio with sentiments against your success, they have witnessed legions before you try to get to the house unscathed.

Once you finish putting out and drive up the hill to the doorstep of the clubhouse take a second to stop and look back up the finishing holes. There is one last Kodak moment from a memorable golf course experience that will prod you to return for more.

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

#1 Par 5 516/489 yards

Playable five par to begin. Drive left center between the bunkers-about 206 to carry the bunker on the left and 250 to the bunker on the right from the Blue Tee. The fairway is pinched at about 160 so you have to carry your second past bunker at to around 100. Very small green is set in a hollow on a diagonal 4 to 10 behind a nest of bunkers short left. Green surround is gorgeous-see lot of that all day.

#2 Par 4 394/364

Wow, what a view off this tee of the mountain range backdrop. Drive is center here even with the bunker on the right that starts at 230. Big hitters will have to take on the edge of that bunker because they will run out of fairway down the left. Craftily set green is wedged up into an alcove behind a waste terrarium on the left and a bunker on the right. Tricky green has a spine running down it's axis which splits the putting surface into two distinct lobes. Putting across the ridge is a three-putt waiting to happen.

#3 Par 3 168/139

Mid iron across the desert field of scrub, brush, and plummy growth to a deep green on a 5 to 11 in a sand tournament. Front left bunker is a deep pit that covers up to the center of the green. The green banks steeply back to front. Favors a right to left flight working up the green. One more hidden bunker deep left beyond the green that must not see much action.

#4 Par 4 424/387

First of two really strong par fours. Drive to center short of the bunker constellation on the left. Long club up to a green ledged to the right behind a deep bunker. Andrew Luck horseshoe bunker behind for accent. Going to have to turn it left to right and try to feed it onto the front of this green or accept a chip and run up the green from the bail area on the left.

#5 Par 4 400/380

Long almost double dog leg par 4. Drive across the desert wilderness is to center as close to the giant bunker flanking the left as you dare to get a view angle to the green set back to the right. Low trenched desert area flanks the right of the hole all the way to the green and one more bunker squeezes the perched green on the left. Tine green slopes to the right toward the waste area which sets up for a draw approach to defeat that roll out.

#6 Par 4 310/279

Following the two bears you just played is a slippery short one. Drive needs to be on the left just inside the bunker on the left that begins at 215. Short club to a peninsula green surrounded by threatening water. One pot front right defines the carry. Green has a spine from 5 to 11 that creates two distinct segments. Anything right of the spine takes the downhill and can wander into the wrap around water. Approach must work up the left side of the spine and feed over the top after slowing down.

#7 Par 5 548/520

True over hill over dale three-shot hole. Drive to center adjacent to the bunkers that define the entire right side of the hole all the way to the green. Your lay up is likely about 180-200 to a wide area just before the bunkers choke the landing area at about 100 yards. The big hitters can go further but there is a dip the last 100 yards which will keep them from reaching the putting surface. 40 yard stepped green is almost moated by sand on both sides so your approach must have no wander on it.

#8 Par 3 138/119

Wow II on first visit to the Blue Lagoon. Shortish pitch to a diagonal green protruding out into the hazard on the left. Green is handsomely framed by sand, scrub, and tall palm trees behind. Back left of the green banks away into the water so going after flags there seems a specious act.

#9 Par 4 437/408

Tough finishing hole for this side. Drive strong to center between the bunkers at 250. The water encroaches the long approach on the left and continues around adjacent to the green. Must decide whether to take this on and try to slip one through the narrow opening or lay up short right for a pitch and putt-it may be the only way to make par. The view of the green, clubhouse, and the mountain setting is breath taking.

#10 Par 4 421/393

The back starts with another jaw dropping view. Long serpentine Par 4 fairway bunkers frame the hole all the way. Drive is left center off the bunkers-no way to carry 235 in the air over the bunkers on the right. You are left with 200 plus to a green hiding it's head behind a bunker encroaching the front left. The green sits up and will repel timid long shots. Once again a lay up to 50 and a pitch may be the best way to challenge par.

#11 Par 4 427/396

Second long one in a row-similar fairway bunker configuration to the last. The drive is intimidating because it must carry some tall desert scrub that somewhat masks the uphill landing area. The second shot here has a constricted neck of the fairway to negotiate at 50 yards. It is a bit of a dell green since there are no bunkers in front and there are grassy dips on either side. The green has a severe slope to the right.

#12 Par 4 395/371

Sort of a slider Par 4 here to the left. Big uphill driving area will cheat you of some roll out on the drive so if you hit it to center should leave about 175 to 195 to center. Green is hidden behind a desert terrarium on the left that takes up the last 100 yards.. Carry shot into this one must be a draw trying to skirt the cavernous waste area and work up the opening in front.

#13 Par 5 523/502

This is an intimidating hole with bunkering everywhere from tee to green. Full three-shotter where you need an accurate R to L tee ball to center of the narrow hour glass fairway. Lay up will be a full club to get past the bunker on the right at 140 to try to reach a fat area of the fairway on the left at 110. 44 yard deep narrow putting surface with sand constriction sits well above you.

#14 Par 3 163/141

Finally have a short hole on this side. Just an esthetically pleasing short hole set in an alcove setting surrounded by tall palms. Middle sized iron to another long and narrow green with a major sand and desert flora feature dominating the short left side of the hole. A horseshoe bunker fronts the left that you need to work a draw around. Green tilts left until back right center and then falls off into a grassy hollow long right.

#15 Par 4 302/279

Theoretically driveable Par 4 but with serious onerous green setting. A very generous landing area but you need to be out on the right just above the waste area that flanks the right side of the hole for a good look at the diagonal set green to the left. Super deep horseshoe bunker protects the left approach line so it needs to be a right to left curve to work around this and against the predominate slope of the green. The real difficulty is the large scapula protruding out of the left back corner of the green that repels shots right and long. Big rough laden collection area behind. Making par here is a full four shot focus affair.

#16 Par 4 405/368

A piece of Pine Valley the look off the tee is sand scary. Another strong Par 4 you need to drive to center should leave 180ish up the gut to a green above with a front pinched by mounds and bunkers. The last bunker on left is about an acre of serpentine sand that covers the last 50 yards and wraps the left side of the green.

#17 Par 3 192/170

Revisiting the Gilligan Lagoon for a long Par 3. A full and precarious right to left carry over the water up the diagonal line of the green. Sand waste area up the right between the water and the fairway but it narrows to sliver of sand and a stone wall green side. The back third of the green falls back and right to the water mirroring it's lagoon sister #8.

#18 Par 5 513/468

The round ends with a truncated Par 5 that looks like it is from Dubai. Need to drive strong tumbling down the fairway to have a chance to fly your lay up across the transition stream that cuts the fairway at 170 to 135. If you can carry that the water element widens on the right from 130 in so the lay up is to the left. 40 yard green sits on the 7 to 1 angle and missing right will be no option. Going for this one in two is full of peril but it might be with a middle iron if the tee ball chased far enough.