

Ojai Valley Inn Golf Course Ojai Valley, California

Architect: George Thomas and Bobby Bell (1923)

	Par	Rating	Slope	Yardage
Blue	70	71	131	6292
White	70	69.3	126	5908
Red	71	71.3	131	5211

Overview:

George Thomas and Bobby Bell, a pair of graduates of the Philadelphia school of golf architects, migrated their professional shingle to the West Coast around 1920. They quickly established themselves as a go to pair for pulling quality golf courses out of the challenging terrain of this part of the country. Along with Alister MacKenzie they went on to produce some of the finest golf courses in this region.

Ojai Valley Inn was created around the same time of it's more storied sister Thomas-Bell designs like Bel-Air, Riviera, and Los Angeles Country Club. Set against the dramatic mountain ridges that surround the Ojai Valley, you will see genius of these two men in their ability to refine the effect of the rugged topography with innovative routing and implementation of the strategic design concepts that make their courses a joy to play.

The tight configuration of the available land for golf led them to an unusual course routing that includes three Par 5's and five Par 3's in a Par 70 layout that now measures just under 6300 yards from the back tees. But when you consider about 350 yards in exchange of a long hole for an extra short hole and the effect the hills and the wind have on lengthening many approach shots, there is nothing meek about the golf challenge Ojai Valley presents.

This set of green surfaces are as consistently small as any I have seen on a championship course, so finding the target requires great precision. They have segmentation and slope which means approach line and trajectory really matter if you are going to avoid putting humiliation on the greens. The signature high edge, flash faced bunkers that Bell brought to all of their creations coupled with the drastic fall offs adds intimidation to the mix. To have success out here it takes a tactical approach to driving to find proper approach positions based on the day's pin.

There is a convenient grass turf driving range and short game prep area just below the golf shop, make use of it to get your swing tuned in before you embark to the first tee as the front nine opens with five holes that will get your immediate attention. They play across some of the hilliest terrain on the property and demand disciplined shot making right out of the gate to avoid inflicting serious scorecard damage early in the round.

The first two holes you have to put your tee shots in a relatively small landing area (see the Hole-By-Hole Analysis below) to have a credible approach to two very angular green complexes. On the second if you succeed in finding the center of the fairway, you have a short club in hand but are staring through a large picture window at a steeply pitched green that hovers above a harrowing barranca from which there is no recovery.

Two short Par 3 holes on the front, the first of which you reach at the third, require delicate short shots into tiny greens with no bail outs. The 100-yard pitch on the third seems innocuous to the eye, but picking the right club given the elevation change and any wind can make this very small target particularly elusive.

After another bracketed carry across the “Deer Canyon” on the short Par 4 fourth, you face a classic George Thomas uphill approach over a browed Billy Bell flash faced bunker that guards the left front of the green. The pitch up the hill better have serious friction because the green is barely the size of your thumb nail.

Take a pause on the precipice tee of the hole they call “Condor’s Nest” to appreciate the glorious backdrop the surrounding mountains present as you look down at this long Par 4 unfurling below your feet. This represents a swift change in gear as four of the next five holes will give you plenty of room to unleash your swing and channel your inner Dustin Johnson.

The seventh hole, “Crosby’s Creek named in deference to the Hollywood star who played here often throughout his career, is the #1 Handicap hole on the card and it demands two well executed blows to have any chance to make a par. The key is to protect from the train wreck number if you are out of position off this tee, as a stream runs diagonally through the second half of the hole and will give you serious pause in your club selection to reach a very tight plateau green complex framed by trees and deep Billy Bell bunkers.

After the second of the short pitch Par 3’s you have a very handsome march up “Eucalyptus Alley” on the long awaited first Par 5 of the day. The green complex set into a hill just below the hotel is framed by stacked flash faced bunkers and makes for one of the many Kodak moments of your day.

Make sure to get a little snack and some cold refreshment from Libby’s Market as you make your way up the hill on the other side of the hotel to the tenth tee. This next series of holes have delectable visuals as they play on the high side of the property to start the inward half.

The look off this tenth tee is majestic as a sweeping long Par 4 falls below your feet and then works back uphill to the tight green complex. The mountain backdrop is the stage for the Pink Sunsets this place is known for. Two scoring opportunities presents themselves on the long Par 3 and short Par 5 that follow as you work your way back to the thirteenth tee to play a mirror image Par 4 adjacent to the tenth.

Preparing for the final run you start wrapping back around the lower end of the property you experienced on the opening nine where elbow room is going to disappear and precise shot making will prevail. You need to take advantage of the gettable Par 3 and Par 5 at fourteen and fifteen because the mysterious “Lost Holes of Ojai” are just ahead.

In the years of the Second World War the military had abducted the land under a few holes in a remote corner of the property which made them disappear. But in a restoration in the late 1990’s these two “Lost Holes” were rediscovered and, along with the stiff finishing hole, set up a dramatic final exam to your golfing day.

Part I is “Captains Pride” a unique survival par three that you may think does not fit the flavor of the course. But the spectacular view you take in from the precipice tee makes it the signature hole in all their publications. The parameters of this hole are as tight as any you have seen all day so a very conservative approach is requisite in avoiding a bad number at this point of round.

Part II is the multiple choice section of the test called “Inspiration”. The tee box on seventeen is perched by itself, cocooned by high mountain topography, which creates a tranquil respite that many have used for memorable wedding ceremonies. Nuptials aside it takes two dexterous decisions and well executed strokes to make a much needed par on the second of the reincarnated holes.

The essay section is the eighteenth, a steep march back up to the clubhouse which will put extra pressure on trying to win the back nine Nassau. The amount of defensiveness required in the final approach is totally dependent on your tee ball position. There are pars to be made with a dexterous pitch and putt from short right if the carry over the yawning Billy Bunker that fronts the left side of this precipice green complex seems too much to swallow.

If you picked the right tee length there is a good chance the tally ends up in the satisfactory range, but I assure you that on reflection you are going to feel you left a few out there. A return visit to get another shot at this intriguing Thomas/Bell creation is something I look forward to as well.

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

#1 Par 4 373/371 Yards Plum Blossom

Dogear right over a blind hill. Aim at the cart path toward the second tee and the ball should feed to a collection area about 130 yards out. Expect a side slope lie into a shelf green perched into the hill above. One more club in for the elevation change to a green guarded by a deep U-shaped face bunker front left and a deep swale front right below the face front. Side hill right of the green influences everything, the bounce on the approach and any subsequent pitch or putt.

#2 Par 4 358/330 Devils Cauldron

Truncated sharp dogleg right where you have to constrain your shots to stay out of the ever present barrancas down the right and then surrounding the green. 200 to 210 yards off the tee at the fairway bunker will leave 110 to 130 to the raised green set to the right on the other side of the barranca. Green is tipped from back right to front left and there is an unseen bunker long to contain an overly aggressive approach. Best approach miss is long into the fat wider part of the green.

#3 Par 3 115/105 Shorty

Very short downhill pitch to a kidney shaped green set 5 to 11 protected by bunkers left and right. For some reason it does not play shorter than the measure. The green has fall off edges all around so the aiming point is center of the green below the hole. Anything long or right is dead on arrival.

#4 Par 4 297/274 Deer Canyon

The short hole plays uphill and into the prevailing wind so it is slightly longer than it's measure. Aim at the tree at the top on the hill on right and let a draw fall back into the center of the fairway where it starts to narrow precipitously. The approach is uphill over a single clove shaped classic Billy Bell bunker short and left of the

putting surface. Even though this green is the size of your thumbprint, if you drive it in middle of the fairway this is a scoring opportunity with a short club.

#5 Par 4 440/433 Condor's Nest

From a perched tee this is a long downhill hole that generally plays downwind. Safest drive is to aim at the red tree on the right. But an alternative for the aggressive player is a draw that comes down the left side behind the big tree on the left and catches the power slot to jump an extra 30 yards forward. Long second is at the slight mound just short on the left edge of the green and let it feed onto the green. Green is protected by a raised back edge deep bunker on the right and the surface slopes left to right so aim to left center and let gravity feed your ball to the pin of the day.

#6 Par 4 312/299 Mistletoe

Another short four par you tee ball is about 200 to 220 yards with a slight draw at the right fairway bunker that extends to the green's edge. This leaves a short pitch into slightly raised super small green protected by this bunker and another high lipped bunker on the left. It is a short pitch in but no good approach lands past center because there is a creek just over the back that can collect something with too much zeal.

#7 Par 4 392/379 Crosby's Creek

The #1 Handicap hole. Drive at the left rough and let the prevailing hill feed it to the fairway. Anything right the approach is blocked by the trees. The creek diagonally meanders through the center of the fairway from right to left the second half of the hole toward a big tree that frames the left of a green that sits above the fairway. If you have doubts about the carry to the green because your drive is out of position, lay up left about 110 yards from the green. The green has a false front so take enough club to reach the center and avoid the lone, deep face bunker front right from where up and downs are hard to come by.

#8 Par 3 128/119 Hogan's Hollow

Another short iron three par that can confound you. The view of the raised pie slice green is obscured by the rock hill on the right and it sits substantially above you so it plays a club and a half longer. There is a false front on the left that feeds down to a hazard and one lone bunker hidden from view right of the green. Center of the green is the target for all pins. Anything in the right bunker is an extremely tough up and down since the green slope falls away from the bunker.

#9 Par 5 517/499 Eucalyptus Alley

Named because the path from tee to green is the straight and narrow through parallel eucalyptus trees cordoning both sides. There is mounding along both sides of the fairway that can help contain your drive from the tree line. Slight left to right drive into the center of the fairway will run into a hill. Unless you carry the hilltop there is no way to reach this green in two. Lay up is a longer club into the valley short of the fairway bunker which gives you a clear look at the raised putting surface with bunkers straddling on both sides. The green is long and stepped to the left so the best approach turns in from the right to find the correct level of the pin for the day.

#10 Par 4 419/404 Matilaja

This picturesque dogleg was named after an Indian dignitary of the tribe that inhabited these parts way be when. Drive off the high tee directly in front of the restaurants at the fairway that sprawls out below your feet. Aim at bunker on the right and the side slope will feed left into the center of the driving area. Uphill approach into a veal chop shaped green that is sandwiched by deep bunkers. Aim at the mound just off the edge of the right bunkers which will feed the ball to center. False front so pick enough club, probably a club and a half more, to get up into the center of the putting surface.

#11 Par 3 227/181 Pink Moment

A medium to large par 3 so named for the beautiful pink sunset staged each evening on the mountain backdrop behind. As mentioned all three of the one shot holes on this side play to a similar club selection. You want to sling a soft draw off the tree behind the back right corner of this green to avoid the sprawling amoeba bunker that flanks the whole left side of the putting surface. The green is flat which is good news and bad news-good news there is not much break once you get on, bad news it will not hold a lower trajectory shot very well. You can use the roller derby side banking that corrals the right side of the green to slow down your approach and feed it to the center of the green.

#12 Par 5 487/458 Honeysuckle

Heading back up to the clubhouse, this gentle tree lined journey from tee to green is the shortest of the five pars out here. Slight fade off the tee gives you the best view of the green complex. It is certainly reachable with a big tee ball otherwise lay up short of the fairway bunker to get the best access angle into the length of this tiered green. There is another bunker draping the right side but with a short club in hand flag hunting is in order. Lots of undulation here so try to plan the roll out of an approach accordingly. The back right pin is on a very small shelflet and there is one more bunker just behind so it will take a precise lawn dart to engage this pin.

#13 Par 4 405/399 Valley Oak

Once again at the steps to the restaurants this looks like a mirror image of number ten but it is a less severe approach on your second. Slight draw to left center leaves a decent carry, about a half a club more, up a ramp into a green that is well protected by a bunker in front right and a false front on the left. One more bunker back left frames approach into this diagonal tiered green set from 8 to 2. If you work your approach up into the green to today's flag it this hole will present a good scoring opportunity.

#14 Par 3 203/186 Sander's Snare

Second of the longish par threes on this side, this is a delectable view from a high tee to a green that plays slightly downhill but into the prevailing breeze so the distance is likely true to the measure. Deep bunkers haunt either side but there is open access to the green. It is a beautiful sight watching your shot out of the sky toward this inviting target. I think middle of the green is the preferred landing spot for all pins.

#15 Par 5 571/510 The Landing

One last restful breadth before a very difficult finish. As the name indicates this tumbling fairway is a bit of a landing strip, but the hole is a full three shot one for sure. Drive is a draw aimed at the end of the eucalyptus

trees that frame the right of the green that will follow the right to left slope of the fairway. Lay up as long a club as you are willing to an attack short iron spot of your preference. The raised brow on the front right bunker masks a piece of the green and another flanking bunker on the left, but there is no real trickery in the putting surface so try to get it close.

#16 Par 3 203/179 Captain's Pride

Now the final exam begins on the first of the jaw dropping "Lost Holes" that were restored in the late 1990's. This is a long carry shot across a sea of bunkers into a long rectangular narrowing green lodged precariously above a hazard on the left and OB on the right. Precision is required to keep your ball out of all the mishugas. Aim just over the front bunker into the first third of the green, anything past that point is just tempting bad fate. The raised sides will dampen and feed the proper approach into the center of the green. Truth be told, par is an elusive score here, so a second shot from the bunker closest to the putting surface is a hedge strategy for making bogey and delimiting damage to your scorecard.

#17 Par 4 403/385 Inspiration

From the elevated matrimonial tee box, the view of the Ojai Valley gives this hole it's name. This is a full forced carry drive where you want to hit a draw at the left bunker and let the slope of the fairway hold it on the left side. Any approach from the right is more difficult because of the diagonal set of the green. From the left the approach shot is slightly downhill into a target tucked right where deep bunkering flanks the low right and the high left of a green complex with many segments shaped like a preying mantis. It is important to get the ball into the right segment or two putts will be a chore.

#18 Par 4 442/387 Demaret's Challenge

Take a moment to walk onto the back tee for a very cool look from an alcove tee box across the abyss to the landing area. Fortunately, if you are playing a sensible distance, you get to walk up another 55 yards to a more reasonable teeing position to play this very strong #2 Handicap hole. Strong draw off the tee will work down the hole but you must hold it to right center to get an unobstructed view on your uphill approach into the perched green complex. With the uphill elevation component this approach will play every bit of 200 + yards to a green with strong bunker protection short left and middle right and a sentinel tree on the right with some reach framing the target. Working the ball up the opening into the back left of the green is the task, so don't be surprised if it takes a recovery pitch and a putt to make a well hard earned par on this challenging finishing hole.

