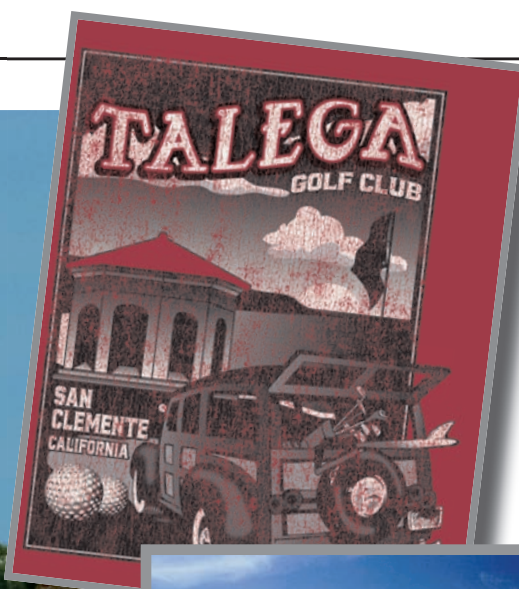




UP, GOLF'S UP!



It doesn't take long to realize there's a different vibe at the Talega Golf Club than at most other golf courses you've played. It starts right at their website: How many golf courses do you know that offer a surf report? Talega does.

And it's no wonder since the club sits high above San Clemente, the "Spanish City by the Sea" that is home to beautiful beaches, quality waves and a surf culture that's well established as one of California's most ardent.

So it's a natural that Talega would want to take a bit of that surf culture and mix it with golf to create a truly unique golf experience. If the location doesn't sell you on the surf and golf theme, a visit to "The Shop at Talega" will seal the deal. It's there that you will not only find the Taylor Mades and Nikes of the golf world, but you'll also find Rainbow Sandals (a fixture in the beach community of San Clemente), Hurley, Oakley and Electric – surf-based companies.

Maybe the Del Mar horsetrack is wrong in claiming it's "where the surf meets the turf." There's a solid argument that the same could be said of Talega. The turf's just cut a little tighter in places at Talega.

And to take it one step further, this summer marked the debut of the Surf and Turf Summer Camp at Talega – where kids would surf in the morning at nearby San Onofre and then golf in the afternoon at Talega. Oh, to be young again.

So where has Talega been? The Fred Couples "signature" course has been in San Clemente since 2001, but it's only been in 2009 that things have truly changed with a new owner, new general manager (Peter Dalkas), a new chef ... and, a new attitude.

And the prices are even lower. Go figure.

Dalkus came over from the Arroyo Trabuco Golf Club in Mission Viejo and he brought in the lower prices. He also brought in a new management team, a team that was on board with the new attitude that Dalkus is instilling daily at Talega.

What they've done is create a golf course that's not stuffy and not all about the golf. How's this for a promotion: Present your scorecard and your first beer is just 19 cents at the Signature Grill, where TV screens show football games, baseball games and any other sporting event that is taking place. There's also a happy hour all-you-can-eat buffet every Monday through Thursday from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m., and on Mondays that special runs all the way until the Monday Night Football game ends. A few of the other promotions include a Bloody Mary bar on Sunday mornings where you build your own; a \$16.95 Sunday brunch with live music; Friday night prime rib, shrimp and clam bucket dinners ... and on our day at the course, we enjoyed the barbeque that was on-going outside on the patio of the Spanish style clubhouse.

"We've relaxed this place a lot," Dalkas said. "We've turned it around. We've lowered our rates, lowered the senior age for senior rates to 55

how to avoid what seems like bunkers everywhere – both in the fairway and guarding the green.

There's also plenty of undulation on the course, and wayward shots often leave you with lies where your feet are above or below the ball. Keep it in the fairway, however, and you'll be rewarded. There is plenty of opportunity to hit those fairways since most of the holes are fairly wide – especially on the front side. If your driver fails you, however, you'll quickly get to know the picturesque canyons and their natural flora a bit more than you'd probably like.

The back nine features less sand, but it's got a tighter feel than the front nine. Most in our foursome found the back nine more enjoyable, as you feel fairly remote and the homes are definitely less noticeable.

The greens are challenging but fair and were in good condition for our round. The entire course is well maintained and gives you the opportunity to score well. Although the new owners and management have changed the philosophy of the club, they haven't put the course on the backburner. It's still the main reason to come and play at Talega.

In addition to all the other changes at Talega, one of the more popular



years old, we have junior rates ... We just wanted to get really aggressive and we have. We had to come back to reality with our pricing."

As for selling surf lifestyle product in the pro shop, Dalkas said: "People don't want to buy golf clothes just for golf anymore, so we brought in Hurley, Electric, Oakley ... more lifestyle brands. We're trying to bring a laid-back surf community to the club and it's working."

But we do play golf for the enjoyment of playing golf, and Talega doesn't come up short in that area either. As Dalkas says, "We have a high-end course, but we wanted to make a more laid-back club."

The 6951-yard (from the tips), par 72 course offers a challenge to your game and a feast for your eyes as you meander through the back hills of San Clemente. With four tee boxes to choose from, you can make the course as challenging or as enjoyable as you like. The course is laid out in two nine-hole tracks and there are houses, though they are virtually unnoticeable on the back nine.

One thing you will notice is an abundance of sand traps, especially on the par 4 third hole. From the tee box you'll swear you've rolled up on the beach at Normandy and - initially at least - you have virtually no idea where to safely aim your tee shot. That's where the on-board GPS system (one of the best we've ever seen – the screen is huge and tells you everything you need to know, including exactly where the carts from the group in front of you are in relation to your cart) comes in handy, as it provides advice on

ones has to be a change to the green fees. Residents can play Monday through Thursday for \$70 with the price going up to \$80 on Fridays and \$90 on weekends and holidays. Non-residents can add another \$10 to that fee, making it difficult to find a better round of quality golf for less money.

There are also membership packages that aren't over the top in how they are priced. An individual can purchase a \$6000 annual membership and play all the golf they want for free – and their guest pay only the nine-hole rate. For \$11,000 there's a family membership with mom, dad and all the kids under the age of 16 getting unlimited free golf. Not bad.

In addition to great golf, good food and drink and ultra-competitive pricing, Talega also offers banquet facilities that can cater to everything from weddings to tournaments.

"People always tell us they don't see pricing on our tournament or wedding packages on our website," Dalkas said. "We don't do that because we want to hear what their budget is. We work with everybody – from brides to large companies and groups. We are trying to be consumer minded."

Simply put, the Talega Golf Club is no longer a club where you play your round, toss the clubs in the trunk and hit the road. This is a place where you can spend a day and at least a portion of your evening. **CGN**