

Paa-Ko Ridge: New Mexico's Best Layout is Spiritual Among Anasazi

By *David R. Holland, Senior Writer*

SANDIA PARK, NM - Paa-Ko Ridge could be the best new golf course opened in the 21st century.

One by one travel golfers are coming here to pay pilgrimage among ancient Anasazi ruins, below azure skies, from atop rocky-ridge mesas lined with scrub oak, piñon pines, prickly pear, barrel cacti and the occasional towering Ponderosa pine.

And these avid golfers are having a near-spiritual "wow" experience on golf "holy" land just off the beautiful Turquoise Trail of New Mexico's winding Highway 14.



Paa-Ko Ridge is one of those few golf courses where your senses come to attention every time you climb to each subsequent tee box. Everytime you see the next hole's unique layout and the challenge it presents, you know this is something special.

Yep, Ken Dye's Paa-Ko Ridge is a classic in its infancy. Here's a prediction: When *Golf Magazine* comes out with its next Top 100 You Can Play List, this stunning beauty in the eastern foothills of the Sandia Mountains, high above Albuquerque, will be in the Top 20. If it isn't, somebody goofed.



"Lots of people have agreed with me that Paa-Ko Ridge has an opening hole followed by 17 signature holes," said Warren Lehr, Director of Golf. "When one *Golf Digest* rater played here he told me he liked it better than Cypress Point. I couldn't believe it. I laughed out loud, and said 'I don't know about that', but I will say this - Paa-Ko Ridge is in my top five and I've played many of the great courses in the world."

Lehr's favorites? Cypress Point, The Old Course at St. Andrews, Royal Dornoch, The Olympic Club and Prairie Dunes in Hutchinson, KS.

"For the dollar value I'd put Paa-Ko against any of those," Lehr said. "The par-3 No. 4, with its 100-yard long, four-tiered green is unlike any I've seen. It's just one 'wow' experience after another, building like a crescendo, then you reach the high point at No. 17, and it's just one of the world-class vistas in golf."

Playing at almost 6,500 feet in elevation, the 7,562-yard long par 72 doesn't play too long for the solid low-handicapper. The starter will recommend 5-9 handicapper play from the tee one up from the back and the 10-19 player from two up. There are five sets of tees, rolling, generous bluegrass fairways and multi-tiered bentgrass greens.

And the best news is that nine more holes are under construction and right now very few houses are under



Paa-Ko Ridge outside Albuquerque

construction, meaning there's peace and quiet with this nature walk.

So what about that No. 4? Called Dye-Abolical, this hole measures only 183 yards from the back, "but if we put the pin in the rear on the 100-yard long green it can play more like 288," said Lehr. There's 13 feet of elevation rise to the green, also with a ravine carry.

The crescendo builds at No. 15, Turquoise Trail, a 640-yard dogleg-right par-5 that drops 100 feet from tee to green. A run-up shot is possible, but don't go long because there's water in back.

No. 16, Agua Caliente, is a 228-yard par-3 with lots of water short and left. There's plenty of bail-out short and right, but the green is huge and has tricky tiers and is split by a hollow.



The panorama of the broad Estancia Valley and surrounding mountains make you stop and ponder at the par-4 17th, 419 yards. Don't miss climbing to the back tees just for the view and photos. Then aim straight ahead and between the two Ponderosa pines.

Trails End, the 474-yard par-4 finale presents lots of room right, but longer hitters will want to nail one left of the fairway bunkers. The approach requires a ravine carry to a large green that has a ridge separating the back left side from the rear.

Houston-based designer Dye, who also carved out legendary Piñon Hills in Farmington, NM, said he was proud he didn't disturb much of the land, keeping most of its natural rugged features.

When you play Paa-Ko Ridge you will appreciate the rugged landscape and start dreaming of the next time you can play this world-class winner.

The Land's History

There are Anasazi ruins nearby where, from the 14th to 17th centuries, Paa-Ko, was a word that meant "root of the cottonwood tree". An archaeological site was excavated in the 1930's and multi-room dwellings, kivas, corrals and a wealth of artifacts were discovered. These findings are now owned and preserved by the University of New Mexico.

"When I'm out there on the golf course," Lehr said. "Many times I think of how special this place is and was when the ancient Indians had the run of the landscape."

Paa-Ko Ridge Golf Club

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Sandia Peak, NM 87047
Phone: 505-281-6000
Toll-free: 1-866-898-5987
Web: www.paakoridge.com.

Green Fees: Weekdays \$34, Weekends \$45, includes range balls. GPS Carts \$17 extra. Please call for special senior and junior rates.

Directions: Twenty minutes from Albuquerque, Paa-Ko Ridge is situated approximately nine miles north of Interstate 40 and 3.5 miles north of the Sandia Crest turn-off on North Highway 14. From Santa Fe, a scenic 45-minutes down the historic Turquoise Trail on Highway 14 South, will bring you to Paa-Ko Ridge.

The Marshal Speaks

After a few weeks working at Paa-Ko Ridge, marshal Dennis Hein went to his wife and daughter and said: "Don't bother buying me any golf balls for Christmas or my birthday. I can find all I need for the rest of my life right here. Hein said the record for lost golf balls in one round was 25. "We found a bunch of empty sleeve boxes in one golf cart and asked the guy. He said 25."

Hein recalled this furry critter story: "A frantic golfer called the pro shop on his cell phone and said there's a bear on the fifth tee! What do I do? The guy in the pro shop told him to let the bear play through."

Awards: *Golf Digest's* No. 1 Best New Affordable Course, 2000.
Golf Magazine's Top 10 New Courses You Can Play, 2000.

2001 *Golf Digest* New Mexico Rankings

1. Paa-Ko Ridge, Sandia Park.
2. Las Campanas (Sunrise), Santa Fe.
3. Piñon Hills, Farmington.
4. U. of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
5. Pueblo de Cochiti, Cochiti Lake.
6. The Links at Sierra Blanca, Ruidoso.
7. Santa Ana (Tamaya/Cheena), Bernalillo.
8. Inn of the Mountain Gods, Mescalero.
9. Isleta Eagle. (Lakes/Mesa), Isleta.
10. Taos C.C., Ranchos de Taos.



Where to Stay

The Sandhill Crane Bed & Breakfast

389 Camino Hermosa

Corrales, NM 87048

Phone: 505-898-2445 or 800-375-2445

E-mail: scranebb@flash.net

Web: www.bbonline.com/nm/sandhill/index.html

Your host, Margo MacInnes, will welcome you to The Sandhill Crane Bed & Breakfast where you will find an adobe hacienda in rural Corrales, bordering the northwestern edge of Albuquerque. The Rio Grande Bosque is just minutes away and you can relax on the porch and enjoy the cool nights.

A complimentary breakfast served in the dining room or on the terrace includes the best seasonal produce available in the local markets, premier blends of coffee and teas, and freshly-baked breads, waffles or a hearty casserole.

Scorecard

Overall Rating: A

Conditions: A-

Layout: A+

Service: A

Practice Fac.: A

Clubhouse/Pro Shop: A

Pace of Play: B+
Value: A+
Scenery: A



David R. Holland, Senior Writer

David R. Holland is an award-winning former sportswriter for The Dallas Morning News, football magazine publisher, and author of The Colorado Golf Bible. Before launching a career as a travel/golf writer, he achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force reserve, serving during the Vietnam and Desert Storm eras. Follow Dave on Twitter [here](#).

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