

The SKY is the Limit

By Patrick Jones

Sky Valley, Georgia, is wedged into the extreme northeast corner of Georgia in mountainous Rabun County. The main route into town requires a steep climb out of the town of Dillard, then a skip across the state line into North Carolina before circling – barely – back into Georgia’s jurisdiction.

For many years, Sky Valley Resort & Country Club has been best known as the answer to a trivia question involving geography and winter precipitation. The former cattle ranch was converted in 1969 into the country’s southernmost ski destination – yes, snow skiing – that featured five slopes and a Swiss chalet-styled lodge.

Alas, based on ownership changes, deferred maintenance, inadequate parking areas, updated feasibility studies, and, indirectly, Al Gore’s global warming predictions, Sky Valley Resort officially shut down snow schussing operations for good in 2005.

What diehard Southern skiers have lost has become the golfers’ gain. New owner Merrill Trust

Communities & Resorts of Atlanta invested millions renovating Sky Valley’s existing, but outdated, course, as well as making other infrastructure improvements.

The destination has long been a favorite summertime escape for Atlantans looking to beat the sweltering heat. It is less than a two-hour drive from downtown and much closer for those in the northern suburbs. It is a scenic, traffic-free, mostly four-lane ride up Interstate 985 to U.S. 441 past Tallulah Gorge, through Dillard and up the mountain. Now, the resort, with altitudes ranging from 3,100 to 4,200 feet, can boast a championship course to be experienced along with the cooler temperatures and lower humidity levels.

The heavily renovated course reopened for play in September of 2007.

Golf architect and former touring professional Bill Bergin was brought in to spearhead the renovations. Bergin, based in Atlanta, was selected, according to Demick, because “Bill will do what is right for a piece

of property. He likes traditional courses, and we felt like that is what needed to be there.”

Merrill Trust is building a 15,000-square-foot clubhouse that will include men’s and women’s locker rooms, dining, a pro shop and, what Demick called a history hall, a passageway filled with memorabilia documenting the history and development of Sky Valley over the decades. Certain to be included in that collection is a photo of Sky Valley’s no-longer-needed ski chalet. It is being dismantled board by board. That lumber will be remilled and used for throughout the new clubhouse.

Sky Valley Resort & Country Club offers vacation rentals as well as homes and sites, but it is on the verge of expanding those offerings. Demick said that Merrill Trust has designs on utilizing the land on and around the old chalet and ski slopes.

“That area is being planned as a resort village,” he says. “It is in planning with our planners and architects. We are still going through conceptual discussions, but we are doing site planning on it.”

Regarding the changes, Bergin says an extensive master planning process was undertaken to “explore the possibilities” of what could be done with the existing Sky Valley layout.

“The truth is, the existing course had just been surviving, but there was no real quality to it,” says Bergin. “It had always been enjoyed, but they were managing to keep the course playable and not much more than that.”

The new design lengthened the course by 500 yards. The par-71 layout can be stretched past 6,900 yards. The new track follows the same corridor as the original course, but Bergin says some holes play “drastically different.”

“The golf holes are in the same location but they are so different,” says Bergin, a former Georgia Amateur champion (1981) and an Auburn University graduate.

As proof, he offers the par-4 second, which had been a drive off the hill and a chip shot. “We moved the green back 80 yards, down the hill and to the left. That is a whole different shot,” says Bergin.

The biggest renovations came on the back nine. Most of the existing holes were “claustrophobically tight” and required just short wedge shots into the green.

“We added a tremendous amount of space and length,” says Bergin. “So not only do you have longer shots, but you have much more of a fair hitting area to hit into.”

The course renovation was not only about making Sky Valley longer. In some cases, holes were shortened for playability. No. 15 is a short, downhill par 3 fronted by a stream that plunges over a waterfall. The hole was shortened by 50 yards and requires just a wedge for most players.

“We created a hole that, no matter

what your ability is, you get to that hole and you have a shot to be successful,” says Bergin. “It is not about length. It is about having the confidence to hit it at the flagstick. It is one of those shots that gets your heart pounding.”

A feature of all great golf courses is memorable and challenging finishing holes. Nos. 16, 17 and 18 at Sky Valley all underwent significant changes.

No. 18, in particular, required some rework. The tees were pushed back and moved left so that the tee shot parallels the lake on the right side. The adjustments included acquiring a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to modify the lake as well.

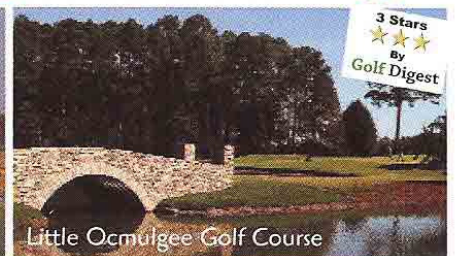
“I feel like we left nothing out there,” says Bergin. “We really dealt with everything we needed to. We made incredible use of a very beautiful mountain valley golf course.” ■

Sky Valley Resort & Country Club
706.746.5302 or skyvalley.com

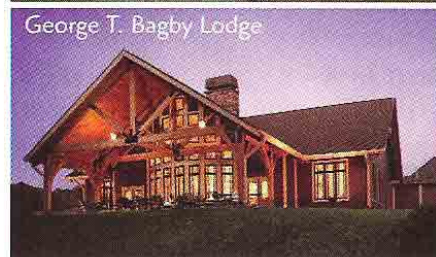
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