

O.B. In the Real O.C.

By Nico Earhart

You can't really see it

from the coastal stretch of highway between Laguna Beach and Corona Del Mar to the North; it lays hidden behind an earthen mound, covered by stunted shrubs, out-of-place pine trees and an unassuming green fence that marks the property line. From the short dip in the road, about halfway between the two towns, you can make out a few of the holes as you look up the valley – their rich green grassland sticking out markedly from the mustard-yellow California chaparral, dry, compared to the thoroughly verdant fairways and greens. Behind this embankment, running up the rise and through the canyons that flow to the clubhouse and hotel is the South Course at Pelican Hill, a hidden gem, perched above the turbulent Pacific Ocean in Newport Coast. If one seeks the best available public golf course in Orange County, and assuming one is unimpeded by the hefty price of admission, then look no further than this Tom Fazio designed track, wound through the burnt, sandy hills between these two seaside hamlets.

To preface the description of Pelican Hill, however, I must explain that Orange County is where I spent the first eighteen years of my life, and where I first took to the crooked stick as a young man; walking the nine-hole course at Ben Brown's in Laguna Beach, with my dad and some of his colleagues during our usual Sunday morning game. I was slower to welcome golf as a pastime than most of my friends who played high school golf, and were shooting in the low 70s while I was still trying to learn how to hit straight shots – but, for a period of time, I (despite a pronounced gap between our skillsets) was still a mainstay of the Sunday game, and

tried to miss as few as possible – even though my scorecard usually ended up in the dumpster by the third or fourth hole. Despite lack of ability however, I was able to lay a foundation (in both swing and mindset) upon which my golfing life would be shaped in the future when I eventually moved to Denver fourteen years ago. So even though I now consider the Mile High City as my home and the place I love, there will always be a special section of my brain that is devoted to the beach, the aquamarine ocean, omnipresent in my home town, the blistering sand that cools as you pass your feet through to the underside, and especially the people of Orange County and Laguna Beach, California.

Before I made my way to Pelican Hill on this weekend trip, however, I needed a warm-up round to sharpen my skills, which had been rusted by a long gap of traveling, and to cautiously test out a back injury that had nagged at me for weeks. I chose for this venue of reanimation, of unwinding my back and acquainting myself again with my old set of Pings, Talega Golf Club, located in San Clemente. This par-72, 6900-yard course is both challenging and easy on the eyes, and can be booked for a much more manageable price. Course conditions, even in this water-starved section of California, were surprisingly favorable – despite a few dehydrated sections where water had been saved on unused sections of the course where golf balls seldomly land, the fairways were in satisfactory shape and the greens had been well-fed and rolled true. If you are heading to Orange County to go to the beach, this is one spot where you can do it, although I would recommend staying out of the hundreds of bunkers around the course if you would like to maintain a low score. Each hole has its own set of unsymmetrically shaped sand traps, seemingly placed at random, as though somebody had used a layout of the course

and a dartboard to select their locations. Daunting water hazards add another degree of difficulty. When pushed back to the tips, this is a course than can challenge even low handicap golfers, and places a distinct importance on the placement of tee shots. This is not just a “pull out the big stick” course. Deviation to the sides can lead to bunkers, water, and plenty of native California grass that will bury misplaced shots in an out-of-bounds wasteland.

Should one be seeking a layout with a profusion of lively par-3s, look no further than Talega, but beware, as these are the holes that also have the majority of the water hazards found on the course. The greens are no picnic either – the majority of them have large undulations and swales that will make for lag-puts that have five to ten feet of break in them. For me, the best hole on the course is the downhill, 523-yard par-5, that features a drive over a precipitous ravine stacked with trees and bushes that would leave Steinbeck at a loss for words. The indicator, a long white pole that lays across the cut, on the opposite of the fairway, is one that will seem accessible from the box, but will provide a harsh penalty should your ball fall right into the canyon or left into the sprawling hillside of grass. If you are lucky enough to stay out of the sand, and keep your ball away from the omnipresent O.B. you’ll enjoy this relatively unknown pearl of Orange County.

With my back loosened up and my familiarity with my old clubs rehashed, I headed up the coast from my home base in Laguna Beach, a mile from the course, to Newport Coast and the extravagant clubhouse at Pelican Hill, from where the North and South courses sprawl. If you are going to play this course, I would recommend getting there early and taking advantage of the driving range and practice facilities, which are included in the price of admission, as this will help you feel better about the price you have just paid (my

‘discounted’ weekday green fee was \$320). Or just chalk it up to money well-spent for this uniquely Orange County golf experience – either way it’s best not to dwell on it.

From hole number one on the South course, a downhill and left-sweeping 443-yard par-4 that has the champions tee box built into the facility like other classic West Coast tracks (think Riviera), there are seldom many declines in majesty. The first par-3, the 142-yard fourth, looks back up the canyon from which the course has made its way, down to a two-tiered green that will leave you with long, curved puts, should you land on the incorrect level. From there, the fifth has an intimidating tee shot over a deep ravine, falling down to a right-bending fairway and an approach shot that will require accuracy to avoid the pot bunker that guards the green and the fall off that guards the back.



Pelican Hills Golf Club. Newport Beach, CA

Upon completing the tenth hole, another brilliant par-4, you head underneath Pacific Coast Highway, skirting the southern extend of the Camino Shores community, to the series of ocean-front holes that Pelican has to offer. The eleventh hole, which seems to start as a straightforward, slightly narrow, downhill shot towards the sea, ends with a green guarded by expansive, links-style bunkers that surround the front and back and present serious penalties should you wind up in the flat, granular sand. The twelfth and thirteenth, back-to-back oceanfront par-3s, present players with a short, but headlong into the wind shot to a small green that is hard to hold. Misplaced shots will roll into more expansive bunkers, like the one guarding the eleventh. The thirteenth has two greens that can be shortened or pushed back depending on the ferocity of the predominantly onshore breeze. To close the round, the 453-yard, uphill par-4, will test players twice with shots over the yawning and shrub-filled canyon; the tee shot crosses the canyon that will be crossed once again on your approach shot to this lanky, two-sided green that is surrounded by hotel guests watching the players wrap up. Pelican Hill delivers on every level of play from tee to green, although for the price, it very well should. The fairways were well maintained and provided perfect lies in

this desiccated Southern California landscape, the green rolled truer than most in the area and long putts were almost guaranteed to hold their lines, and the Romanesque club house and facilities were equally impeccable to their in-game counterparts. If it's the highest standard of golf that you seek in Orange County, look no further than Pelican Hill.

There are a number of other worthy tracks in the area that I didn't get a chance to visit on this trip, but have played before and know to be exceedingly fun – In Irvine there are Oak Creek Golf Club and Strawberry Farms Golf Club, which will both challenge players and cost substantially less than Pelican Hill; I have heard many good things about Black Gold Golf Club in Yorba Linda, though I have never played there myself. And, of course, there is always Ben Brown's (now a part of The Ranch at Laguna Beach hotel) confounding nine-hole layout, where I learned the game. The course, which winds its way up and down Aliso Canyon, in front of Aliso Creek Beach, is a sneaky tester of a course that places gravity upon your iron game (I only hit the driver twice on this short layout). In an ever changing and rapidly developing county in an equally ever-shifting state, this is one of the mainstays that will hopefully be around for decades to come.