

CULTURE

Members Only

A tour of Bighorn Golf Club's new clubhouse offers a glimpse into how the other half lives.

BY CAROLYN HORWITZ

■ As a Jew from Colorado, I don't have much experience with country clubs. The most prestigious one in our area we weren't exactly welcome at. There was another place with more liberal policies called Green Gables (referred to, naturally, as Green Bagels), but we weren't members — my parents didn't play golf or bridge, and as scientists they had no interest in networking or even much socializing. So aside from countless viewings of *Caddyshack*, country clubs had no part in my upbringing.

There's a visual and cultural language to the typical country club that I'm not sure

I understand. Traditional architecture — dormers, columns — is not my thing; I am drawn to modernism. Nor am I a fan of WASP-y décor, or at least the type I've always envisioned a country club to have: overstuffed armchairs, chintz, dusty dining rooms with fussy place settings. Nantucket meets Downton Abbey.

So it is a pleasant surprise to approach the new clubhouse at Bighorn Golf Club in Palm Desert, look past the tennis courts, where four ladies in visors are playing doubles on a Wednesday morning, and take in the graceful swooped roof of a singular contemporary structure. That pointed porte-cochère is easily the defining feature of the clubhouse, its arch mirroring the rise of the mountains in the distance, its prickly apex reminiscent of a yucca leaf. An oculus affords a glimpse of sky, enhancing the light, airy quality.



The 80,000-square-foot clubhouse by Swaback Partners is clad in travertine from Portugal.

1 Leaf-shaped panels house lighting, air conditioning, and sprinklers, without disrupting the seamless undulating ceiling.



2 The building's architecture is based on curves. In a hallway, a glossy Venetian plaster treatment offsets backlit wood panels.



3 Custom, hand-finished wall treatments by Terri Riesenman of Faux You Designs animate the clubhouse. Behind the reception desk are Riesenman's glass-like tiles, designed to resemble petrified wood.

4 The lobby opens to the patio of the restaurant The Pour House, overlooking a golf course.

The clubhouse, all 80,000 square feet of it, was designed by Swaback Partners of Scottsdale, Arizona, and built by San Marcos-based Lusardi Construction. The interiors, dressed in a palette of muted desert tones with jewel-like metallic flourishes, are by Blackbird Interiors of Carlsbad and Palm Desert.

Bighorn wanted a unique contemporary building to replace its old clubhouse, John Sather, a partner in Swaback and the lead designer on the project, tells me. "They didn't need to resort to some sort of Spanish influence or Santa Barbara or Tuscan look. This is an American original. It's a building of the desert."

The design capitalizes on the beauty of the site, a quality Sather believed lacking in the old clubhouse, built in 1991. "It felt and pretty much looked like an office building. You walked in, and there was a receptionist in front of you. I thought it was rather curious given that the spectacular view they could have, little of it was captured. The club functioned for golf events but in no way rose to any level of either great architecture or a wonderful place to gather."

Entering the new building, I'm drawn

"THIS IS AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL. IT'S A BUILDING OF THE DESERT."
—JOHN SATHER, ARCHITECT

toward the glass-walled rear, home to the restaurant The Pour House, by walls that fan out toward the spectacular view of the golf course and mountains beyond. Indeed, there are wide-open views nearly everywhere, including in the Golf Shop, conceived as a glass-walled elliptical volume set within the structure's travertine walls. Several people describe it to me as "Madison Avenue chic." Within the shop is a small branch of local jeweler Leeds & Son, where I am given the opportunity to purchase a 41-carat yellow diamond for \$3.4 million.

The women's locker room has graduated to the main floor, as opposed to its previous incarnation in the basement, and includes a welcoming lounge with an entrance marked by a silver-leaf relief wall. There, four ladies sit at a card table and politely explain that they

are playing not bridge, as I, a common thug, had supposed, but canasta.

The four, all retired, say they "love" the new clubhouse, especially the upgraded women's area. "We were the downstairs group, and now we're on the same level," one says. "We eat more, we are here more. We're here a lot." How many days per week? "Oh, you don't want to know. Please don't ask that question."

The glossy-walled locker area has custom cabinetry tastefully labeled with members' names, luxurious spa-like furnishings and amenities, and generous — like, really huge, you could play canasta in there — showers. I can see why the ladies spend so much time here.

I'm not shown the men's locker room but am assured that it is bigger and "more masculine."

Bighorn Golf Club is overseen by chairman R.D. Hubbard, 82, who led a group of investors in purchasing the facility in 1996 from a subsidiary of electric company Westinghouse. The club has 520 members, average age 54 (young for the area, the principals say). In addition to the clubhouse, the 1,200-acre property comprises two 18-hole golf courses, four tennis courts

(standard and ClayTec), pickleball and bocce courts, two dog parks, a 14,000-square-foot spa and fitness center, a small market with a Starbucks counter, the Canyons Steak House, and a 22,000-square-foot luxury car gallery and sports lounge called The Vault. There are also 463 custom homes, which sell via the Bighorn Properties arm for \$1.5 million to \$40 million. Joining the club does not come cheap: An individual membership with golf costs \$250,000, plus \$30,000 per year in dues.

It was Hubbard's idea to design a new clubhouse after hearing from members that the previous one was outdated. "I came to the conclusion they were right," he tells me during a sit-down in the racy co-ed card room. "So we looked at remodeling, and there's no way you can remodel something that's more than 25 years old and really make it state of the art. So we decided we were better off if we tear the old one down and build a new one."

Hubbard went to club president Carl Cardinalli and gave him a strict deadline to complete the project.

"He said, 'We can't afford to have our membership without a clubhouse for more

than one season,'" Cardinalli recalls. "And I said something like, 'Well, that's pretty aggressive.' And he goes, 'I know.' But that's the way we operate."

The Bighorn crew is proud of the fact that the clubhouse was built from the ground up in just 16 months — Sather says a typical project of this size and level of detail would take at least twice as long — and completed on schedule in November 2017. The project cost "between \$70 million and \$80 million," Hubbard says. To fund it, members were assessed at the rate of \$75,000 each, raising \$35 million. (A spokesperson says that as the club has always operated in the black, it had never before levied an assessment on members. Seven declined to pay and resigned their memberships.)

Bighorn expects to raise another \$35 million from the sale of four penthouses that were strategically built as part of the new clubhouse. The principals believe the integration of a residential component into a golf clubhouse is unprecedented. (One penthouse has sold so far, for an undisclosed price.)

Membership is capped at 550. I ask Hubbard and Cardinalli how the massive investment in the clubhouse will benefit their business going forward.

"Well, you have a rotating membership," Hubbard explains. "In other words, there's always someone moving out and so on. We hope to get to where we've got a waiting list for people wanting to get in. But let me give you an example. Through March 10 or 12, we've sold ... I think it is now 21 or 22 properties for \$85 million — just since Jan. 1, in other words. The new clubhouse is bringing us a lot of new members and new homeowners that are wanting to move in here."

"The revolving door is very important to a club," Cardinalli adds. "That's why the young membership ... is important, because you have other members who are aging out of the club."

"Well," Hubbard points out, "they're dying, too." That may be the only way some people leave what the spokesperson describes more than once as "Utopia." As Hubbard explains, "You've got everything you could possibly want right here."