



World Golf

Exclusive Emerald Dunes Club in West Palm Beach, Florida raises the bar with renovation, special touches

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No detail was overlooked at Emerald Dunes Club, where they thought of everything and then some in a recent renovation that brought this south Florida club into the conversation of best private clubs of America.

Reopened this fall after \$15 million in improvements, including a redesign by its original architect, the Emerald Dunes Club is as beautiful as it is exclusive.

Originally opened as a premium daily-fee club in 1990, Emerald Dunes has gone through a few changes over the years, including a stint as a private club once owned by the late Frank Chirkinian of CBS Sports fame.

Even then, before this latest metamorphosis, Chirkinian once said, "It may be the best course in the state of Florida. We have a standing offer of two-dozen balls if you have a bad lie in any fairway."

Now the bar has been raised even higher. And with only 85 members, and a projected cap of 200 members under new ownership, it doesn't get much more exclusive in the country's wealthiest county.

Tom Fazio gets another crack

One of the aspects that makes this project special is that the original architect, Tom Fazio, personally managed the extensive renovation.

New championship back tees were added, other tees were expanded or redesigned, fairways were widened on several holes, some new greens were created and others reshaped, bunkers were added to increase their number to more than 100, and two holes were reconfigured. The course also got a new irrigation system as well as ornamental grasses, a couple of waterfalls, 60 acres of lakes and one great looking hole after another on this 7,102-yard par 72.

"Tom Fazio took the gem of his original design and perfected it," said Ken Green, executive vice president at Emerald Dunes. "He's like a junior high cheerleader when he talks about it."

Indeed, this one got Fazio's special touch. The highlights of the course are many, perhaps starting with the par-3 fourth, which plays over water to a green with a waterfall as a backdrop. The eighth is another unique par 3, but instead of water, it's loaded sand, with bunkers from tee to green, as Fazio sometimes does.

Another unique characteristic to Florida is that this course, which sits on natural sand dunes, has 80 feet of elevation change with the highest point being around the 10th green and 11 tees. The 10th is a dogleg-right par 4 that plays uphill on the approach to an elevated green. The 11th is a short par 5 with a great view off the tee.

Emerald Dunes also has a strong finishing kick. The 16th is a 179-yard par 3 that plays to a peninsula green over water. The 17th is a long par 5 guarded by trees, bunkers and a tricky green. And the 18th, which has a 50-foot waterfall on the way to another elevated tee, is 442 yards from the back set of five tees and has water down the entire right side, as well as fairway bunkers. That's also where you might see a 12-foot alligator sunning himself on a warm day, of which there is an abundance in south Florida.



Attractive landscaping also was a priority as 2,000 towering, mature palms and trees were planted around the course's perimeter to screen any visible outside architecture and to serve as privacy buffers. Another noteworthy aesthetic improvement was the replacement of old cart paths with crushed shell paths and pavers that seamlessly complement the overall natural look and feel.

"Emerald Dunes has always been one of my favorite courses, and I was pleased to be invited back to make some strategic enhancements to one of the most highly regarded clubs in Florida," Fazio said. "Emerald Dunes is truly a gem, and with the recent improvements, it's an even more dazzling jewel.

"Although it's hard to imagine, we've upgraded the quality of the overall golf experience by ten-fold. With the addition of soft shell paths, native vegetation and an expansive short-game area, the dream keeps getting better. To take something that originally was so well received and make it substantially superior is a special achievement."

Practice area like no other

Another strong suit for Emerald Dunes is its eight-acre, 310-yard, double-sided driving range, which includes more than 28,000 square feet of tee surface. It has five target greens, each framed with shallow sand bunkers, four mini chipping target greens and a USGA-regulation putting green.

Then there's the separate Tom Fazio Short Game Area that includes a 19th hole par 3 that plays from 85 to 135 yards, with two dedicated target greens, a chipping green and an additional putting green, all built to USGA specifications with identical turf conditions as the golf course. Six practice bunkers and a grass pot bunker complete the vast practice amenities available for members to hone their short game skills.

Terraces with a Tuscan influence and a comfortable veranda overlooking the Tom Fazio Short Game Area and 18th green add to the relaxed atmosphere encouraged at Emerald Dunes. Inside the completely refurbished clubhouse, no detail was overlooked. A new color scheme, imported flooring, black and white vintage artwork and imported pots, imported olive trees on the grounds and concierge service are all part of the amenities that are included in the annual dues. In fact, everything is inclusive -- food and beverage, as well as well as cart fees.

Emerald Dunes Club: The verdict

This is one of those places where if you have to ask, you probably can't afford it. But with that said, Emerald Dunes is not only exclusive but special in its own right.

Members here are also members of some of the finest clubs in America, and it is a national membership. Most of all, however, as pampered as members and guests are at Emerald Dunes, it's all about golf and the experience surrounding it.

One aspect, for example, that went virtually untouched was the men's locker room, which still has that masculine feel where members can unwind before or after a round. There's also a caddie program, which members and guests are encouraged to use.

The club also has a great representation on its staff with former PGA Tour player Lee Rinker as its director of golf and Todd Sapere as its head professional. Sapere, who is a fine teacher and player himself, is joined by assistant Valeria LaPapa, who was brought in from The Breakers. With the great teaching and practice facilities, Emerald Dunes is a premium location for game development.