

# GOLF WEEK

## Golf Week

### Tom Fazio turns around Emerald Dunes

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In its third incarnation, Emerald Dunes is back.

One of the hardest things in property management is to reposition a well-known entity. That's especially the case in golf course operations. The reputation and identity of a facility are usually well established among the local clientele.

That makes what's going on at the Emerald Dunes Club all the more impressive. Here's a Tom Fazio design that opened to much acclaim in 1989, when owner Ray Finch's upscale daily-fee property was celebrated as the 1,000th course in Florida. Its location, at the juncture of Okeechobee Boulevard and the Florida's Turnpike, made it readily accessible to a public that, until then, had been starved of country-club-for-a-day golf. Fazio's design was a welcome relief to area golfers thanks to wide fairways, beautifully sculpted lakes and bunkers, surrounding real estate set back so that it wasn't in play, and just enough elevation and roll to make you feel you were in an interesting place. After Finch sold the property in 2005 and Emerald Dunes went to private membership, however, the club suffered from novice owners trying to compete in an overextended market. Enter new private ownership and a \$15 million renovation.

The Italianate clubhouse has been given a more welcoming feel. What had been a "man cave" is now lighter, airier, more spacious and gender-equitable. Its tiled verandah and Tuscan garden now look out onto a much refreshed golf course, replete with a new, four-acre, short-game area and expanded, double-loaded range with learning center. Denser peripheral plantings of Chinese fan palms and ficus trees completely isolate the golf from the surrounding real estate. What had been veritable roadbeds of pavement for golf cart traffic have been toned down into more natural-fitting crushed cocina shell paths that blend seamlessly into (or behind) crested sand bunkers.

A new, more efficient irrigation system and expanded drainage capacity ensure that Emerald Dunes can absorb south Florida's weather extremes of torrential downpours and searing heat. The par-72 layout, with five sets of tees ranging from 5,193 yards to 7,102, also has been resurfaced with upgraded Bermudagrass turf types: Champions greens; 419 fairways and roughs; and Celebration on the tees.

In a private-club market rife with post-Madoff dealmaking to attract new members, Emerald Dunes is sticking to a strict, if innovative, policy. There's no bargaining, no effort to handpick celebrity members to seed the locker room. An initiation fee of \$75,000 is 80 percent refundable upon departure, and the annual dues of \$18,500 is all-inclusive of carts, golf fees, breakfast, lunch and drinks.

It takes some guts to relaunch with a policy like that. Confidence, too – in the golf course, the clubhouse, its amenities and in the membership. At Emerald Dunes, that faith is now well placed.

## **Rater's Notebook: Emerald Dunes Club**

### **1. Ease and intimacy of routing**

Not an easy parcel to fit in with so much real estate and hardscape around it, but the 180-acre golf course (including 60 acres of lakes) ambles comfortably thanks to well-planted corridors and an inward-looking vista that compels one's interest for its textural variety.

### **2. Quality of feature shaping**

The golfer's eye continually is drawn down the middle, thanks to upswept bunkers and just enough fairway shaping to create awareness of interior hazards on the low side. It helps having a 47-foot man-made "hill" as a convergence point for the 10th and 17th greens as well as the 11th and 18th tees. Bonus points for how native-looking cart paths fit in.

### **3. Natural setting and overall land plan**

Tom Fazio's specialty is converting a naturally desultory site into compelling golf ground.

### **4. Interest of greens and surrounds**

At an average size of 4,600 square feet, these greens seem undersized for the site or at least a little separated from the adjoining bunkers.

### **5. Variety and memorability of par 3s**

Fourth and 14th holes, both facing north, have a similar look of diagonal greens across water with bailout option left. Longest par 3, the 212-yard eighth, feels like a relaxed Redan. Most demanding and interesting is the short 16th with a two-tiered green that tilts left toward the water.

### **6. Variety and memorability of par 4s**

Here's the backbone of the course, with a good mix of holes bending either way. Seductive 12th hole, 346 yards, is most tightly bunkered and to a fall-away green. Long ninth hole, 464 yards, bends relentlessly around pond on right. There's enough room on at least one side of most fairways to drive the ball comfortably, with shorter side usually defined by sand or water.

### **7. Variety and memorability of par 5s**

Short 11th, 495 yards from the back, gets pinched in second landing area and plays to smallest, most elusive green on the course. Best hole on the entire course is the 574-yard 17th, a double dogleg where second shot has to skirt (or carry) a mature oak hammock that creates a dramatically defined risk-reward option.

### **8. Basic conditioning**

No overseeding needed this far south; turf quality is consistent and ensured by limited play.

### **9. Landscape and tree management**

Beautiful mix of ornamental dune-style grasses as well as palm trees throughout course and backdrop of colorful bouganvillia and oleander around clubhouse courtyard.

### **10. Walk in the park test**

Maybe it was the relief provided by getting in behind the gates and escaping surrounding development, but there was a comforting feel of elegance and repose throughout the golf course and clubhouse grounds.

**Emerald Dunes stands out in a crowded private-club market as an impressive turnaround.**