

TRAVEL

Hallowed Ground, Under Repair

Land is the most crucial and varied component of golf. At Indigenous-owned courses, such as B.C.'s St. Eugene and Nk'Mip, that importance takes on a higher meaning. **BY CURTIS GILLESPIE**



I was about to hit my drive on the first hole of St. Eugene Resort, just north of Cranbrook, B.C., when I looked left of the tee, towards the small community that holds, among other things, the administrative offices for the St. Mary's Indian Band, on whose land the course and resort sit. Between the tee deck and the small village, not 30 paces off the back blocks, is the community graveyard.

I considered it for a minute, wondering what it made me think of. Then I remembered the graveyard along the first hole of Ballybunion's Old Course, the towering links on the southeast coast of Ireland. Given that the prevailing wind at Ballybunion is out of the west off the ocean and that the Killeheny graveyard is out of bounds up most of the right side of the hole, more than a few gravestones have been dinged by errant shots. With typical Irish black humour, the local caddies crack that you're dead if you find a rectangular, six-foot deep bunker.

No tee shots will hit the St. Eugene graveyard, however. And not to be a downer, but there aren't any jokes you could or should make about it. It's the graveyard for the St. Mary's Indian Band, which is part of the greater Ktunaxa traditional territory that covers much of lower central B.C. and some of Washington state. The graveyard holds the remains of band members, but many of the graves are unmarked, which is a haunting reminder of the history of the residential school system that blighted our country for more than 100 years.



The century-old building that stands as the main part of the resort and which houses the historic rooms and dining area, is in fact the original structure. The red-brick Kootenay Indian Residential School was built in 1910 and opened in 1912. It was run by different Orders of the Catholic Church until 1970, at which point it closed and the building sat dormant until the band decided to re-purpose it. When debating what to do with the school, Elder Mary Paul said, "Since it was within the St. Eugene Mission School that the culture of the Kootenay Indian was taken away, it should be within that building that it is returned." It was decided that golf should be part of that resurrection. The course opened in 2000 and the resort in 2003. It is the only known residential school that a band has transformed in such fashion. (The Saddle Lake Cree in northeast

Alberta took over the Blue Quills Residential School in the 1970s and eventually repurposed the structure as an Indigenous-run university). The historic school-turned-hotel has photos hung at various spots detailing the history of the site, as well as an interpretive centre that is well worth a visit.

All of which means this is not your ordinary clubhouse and resort. There's serious history to the ground you're sticking your tee into. This might not be the best place for a dive into Canada's relationship with Indigenous people, but a century of mistreatment causing generational trauma might take that long to heal. At least a corner has been turned in the right direction.

Incredibly, golf is a small part of that change, primarily because it is a game played over unique landscapes, many of which are owned by Indigenous ►



peoples. It helps that so many of the courses are great tracks. You can have all the significance you want on a site, but an important location doesn't automatically translate into quality golf. St. Eugene, though, is one of Les Furber's stronger designs. In fact, he likes it so much that he lives nearby and can often be found teeing it up there. The first two holes and the last three run along an open plain in sight of the hotel and clubhouse (which is the old school's barn, now converted and modernized). The remaining 13 holes wind through the pine forest and along the St. Mary River. Among many strong holes, the par-5 ninth stands out, as it plays alongside the rush of the St. Mary with the backdrop to the east being The Steeples, a five-peak ridge at the southern end of the Hughes Range in the Rockies. It's breathtaking. ▶





Nk'Mip Desert Golf Course is both a different kind of golf course than St. Eugene and a different emotional experience. There was no residential school on site in the region and the landscape must have seemed utterly barren when it was carved up and distributed to the Osoyoos Indian Band (OIB) a century ago. Even today it is hot, dry and harsh. This part of southern interior British Columbia is Canada's only desert, after all.

But then a funny thing happened on the way to the 21st century. Canadians discovered the gorgeous lakes, the dry heat and the perfect terroir for making superior wines. The B.C. wine boom of the 1990s was also a boom for overall tourism in the area and the Osoyoos band has taken great advantage of that, weaving the wine, golf and tourism industries into the band's activities and land holdings. Roughly speaking, the OIB land covers the entire eastern half of the Osoyoos/Oliver valley. It is some of the most picturesque terrain in Canada and much of it is now covered in vines. Esteemed winemakers such as Burrowing Owl and Black Hills operate on the hillside just west of the border of the reserve. That's how valuable the land has become.

And Nk'Mip Canyon Desert Golf Course in Oliver is on that land. The course is less elegant than the layout at St. Eugene, but also has a compelling backstory. Here, it was non-Indigenous people — white people, in other words — who, in the early 1960s, worked closely with the band to create the original nine-hole golf course, which operated until the 1990s. At that point, the band took over the course and expanded it to 18 holes and built a new clubhouse. Five of the original holes were redesigned and 13 new ones were built. ▶





The result is a mix of holes playing up and through the desert landscapes of the Oliver east bench, all of which gives it a Scottsdale feel, including cacti, lizards and the occasional rattlesnake. The band also owns an excellent nine-hole short course called Sonoran Dunes and operates the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre at the Spirit Ridge Resort, which commands a striking location overlooking Osoyoos Lake.

It is important to note, however, that the golf development was undertaken primarily for its business potential. Housing was built around the course. Jobs were created. The Osoyoos band has become one of Canada's great Indigenous-business success stories and Nk'Mip is part of that, not just for the immediate impact but in the long term, as well. Many band members are studying at various golf management and superintendent programs with an eye towards careers in the game. The same can be said of the winery that the

band owns, in that it too is both practical and symbolic.

Courses like Nk'Mip and St. Eugene remind us that golf is different in so many ways from every other sport, in that its playing fields have a massive impact on the experience at physical, emotional and psychological levels. Many sports take place in nearly identical settings of the same dimensions. In most circumstances, this is appropriate. You don't want one 100-metre running track to be uphill and another downhill, or some soccer fields to be bigger than others. Most sports are played, figuratively and literally, on level playing fields. This creates comfort and familiarity, as it offers fans and players the ability to create meaningful comparisons and to slip into the passion of a sport no matter where or when they are. The downside is the uniformity of the experience. When you watch a basketball game, it's the same court. A javelin is a javelin. I watched many events during the recent



Summer Olympics and if I hadn't known the location of the Games, the indoor volleyball court, weightlifting stage or pools could have been anywhere. Paris? Okay, sure. But if it had been Detroit or Mumbai, the sport probably would have played out much the same.

But with golf the land matters. The playing field is central to our experience. One of the game's greatest attributes is that it is rooted in and on the land in both a natural and sociological way. To golf at St. Eugene or Nk'Mip, or any Indigenous golf course, is to take part — albeit a small part — in the work being done to reverse the patterns of the past. The land dictates the nature of the course, but what has taken place, or is taking place, on the land informs the feeling of playing the course. It's an inextricable element to the playing of the sport. Walking down the 18th fairway on the Old Course at St Andrews is like being in living museum to the sport. Picking a path through the dunes of Carne is to feel in your bones what it must be like to live in the remote corners of windswept Ireland. Even knocking a ball into the brush and cacti of a Scottsdale desert course is to be reminded of the harshness of the land and what it must have been like to traverse such terrain hundreds of years ago.

St. Eugene and Nk'Mip give golfers a chance to not just to play wonderful golf courses in magical surroundings, but to also participate, even in a tiny way, in a healing process. How lucky we are to be golfers. Because, really, what other sport can offer that kind of playing field, that kind of ground under repair? ♡

