

In summer, only hotheads play golf in Death Valley

By John Bryer
FOR THE INQUIRER

These very hot days of August in Philadelphia bring back fond memories of an August trip a few years ago. Leaving our four young children with relatives, my wife, Denise, and I took an extended weekend trip. Our nominal destination was Las Vegas, where we rented a car and headed west.

A quick trip through the Mojave Desert was a welcome change from our hectic corporate and hospital work lives. Parking the car and walking a mile into the Mojave brought us to a place of unimaginable quietness and peace. Continuing west, we stopped at Edwards Air Force Base — mecca for fans of aviation and space flight.

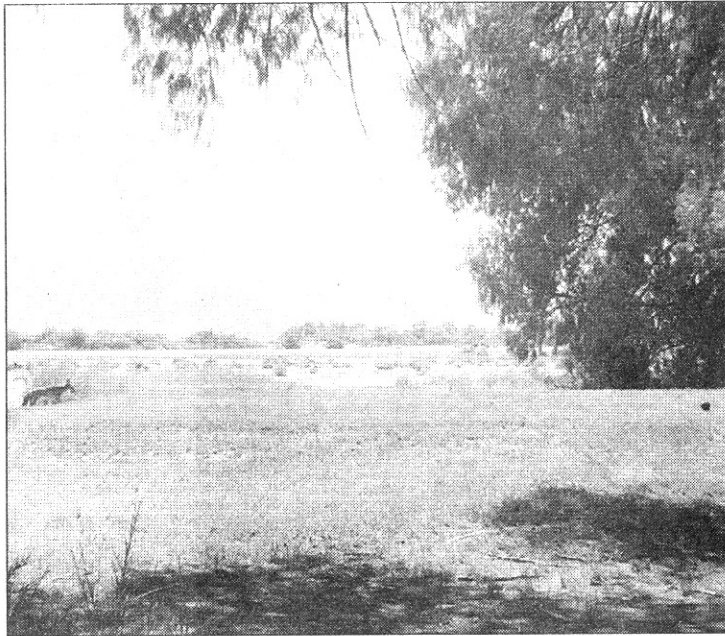
We came to rest that first day in Bakersfield, Calif., where we took in a show by Buck Owens — progenitor of the Bakersfield Sound. The Buck Owens classic “Tiger by the Tail” was dramatic foreshadowing.

The next day, we drove northeast to Death Valley and checked in at the Furnace Creek Ranch. The Furnace Creek golf course is billed as the world’s lowest, at 214 feet below sea level. What better place to card the sort of high score to which I had become accustomed?

They offer a form of golf known as “extreme” golf. This turned out to be more “Why? Games” than “X Games.”

The desk clerk told us that people simply do not golf in Death Valley in the summer months, other than in the very early hours. While I accepted the logic, I was destined to give it a try.

For the small price of \$25 each, we were permitted to play nine holes, including a cart, balls and clubs. Denise had never played golf, but she was willing to have this be her first attempt at the most frustrating game ever invented.



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Not many people were on the golf course at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley. Coyotes, however, were.

It was 2 p.m. when we approached the first tee. My drive was right down the middle. The fact that I topped it and it only went 40 yards didn’t diminish my joy. Not surprisingly, my wife out-drove me.

By the time we got on the green, the heat was taking its toll. After putting out and carding unrespectable single-digit scores, we drove to the second tee, where a coyote trotted in front of me. I looked around and saw more coyotes crossing fairways and in the bushes. I poured a quart of water over my head, thinking that might stop the visions.

As we played the front nine, we saw more coyotes and absolutely no other people. To those unfamiliar with golf, it is more common to see many people and no coyotes.

As the round progressed, we were forced to make concessions. The first thing to go was my wife, who voluntarily dropped out to speed up the process. Next was putting, followed

by the par-four and par-five holes. Every few minutes, I poured cold water on my head, which provided brief relief.

In 45 minutes, the abbreviated round was over, and we dropped off the cart at the unattended office.

Before retreating to our air-conditioned room, we checked the temperature. It was 123 degrees in the shade, which was considerably cooler than the record of 134 degrees. I later learned that, in the summer of 1996, Death Valley experienced 40 days in excess of 120 degrees.

We returned to Las Vegas the next day for our flight home. A healthy respect for the heat was one of our most valuable souvenirs.

John Bryer lives in Downingtown, Chester County.