

New and Improved Poppy Hills is an 18-Hole Bargain



Photo: Northern California Golf Association

The Pebble Beach course is featured in the AT&T Pro-Am and has been firmed up with an upgraded drainage system. Some trees have been taken out by disease or windstorms, opening the greens to faster play.

Imagine if you could play a world-class golf course in Pebble Beach—one boasting the pedigree of a famous designer and the accumulated lore of decades of PGA Tour competition—all for the princely sum of \$55. Well, you can at Poppy Hills, which is a terrific place despite what you may have heard.

How Poppy came to be the most underrated course in Monterey County (and maybe the world) goes back two decades, to when it replaced the incomparable Cypress Point in the Crosby Clambake rota. Almost any course would suffer from the comparison but somehow a couple of Poppy's virtues actually led to problems of perception: The five reachable par-5s that make it so much fun for everyday players slowed down the pros as they idled for eagle opportunities, leading to grouching about a glacial pace of play, and the lovely, transporting setting in the forest was blamed for mucky playing conditions during some of the rainier tournaments.

Complaining about Poppy being soft and sloppy is an outdated critique. Pitch canker and storms have thinned out the trees on the course, lead-

ing to more sunlight and air circulation and thus a drier, firmer turf. (A decade's worth of drainage upgrades have also helped immensely.) The greens are now among the purest in Del Monte Forest, as a new maintenance program has them being rolled almost every morning. And different mowing patterns have effectively widened a handful of fairways, giving players more options on lines of attack, just as course designer Robert Trent Jones, Jr. drew it up.

So Poppy has never been in better shape, and it remains an incredible deal. For Northern California Golf Association members, weekday greens fees are \$55, while twilight rates dip as low as \$35. Poppy is also a haven for juniors, because through the Youth On Course program they can tee it up for a mere \$2. All of this comes with a friendly staff and excellent clubhouse grub. (Monday's tortilla soup is a must-have.) So if you haven't played Poppy Hills in a while, it's definitely worth another look.

Call 831/625-2035 for information or tee times.

—Alan Shipnuck