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CURRENT ISSUE

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By Michael Hiller : Published for AG July 2009

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Smokin' Hot



American Airlines thinks Santa Fe is red hot.

So does Rob Harper, the head of real estate development for Dallas-based Unity Hunt, Inc. And so does the Blackstone Group, the giant hedge fund operator that owns Hilton Hotels, which recently opened a new resort here. With the economy in a tailspin.

Sizzling.

You know what? They're probably right.

Judging from a recent visit to the City Different – a giant confluence of art galleries, massage therapists, intellectuals and nearly 200 restaurants – Santa Fe looks to be smoking hot.

Late last month, American Airlines began nonstop service to Santa Fe's tiny airport, the first commercial airline to serve Santa Fe in decades. Until now, flying to Santa Fe from Dallas – or from nearly anywhere else, for that matter – meant flying to Albuquerque, the closest commercial airport, followed by an hour's drive to Santa Fe.

American's flight 3551 makes it possible to leave DFW International Airport at 10:55 and be walking in the center of Santa Fe's famous Plaza two hours later. Or, if you're like me, you can be on the first tee of an excellent Hale Irwin course, the Towa Golf Course at Hilton's Buffalo Thunder Resort, 20 minutes later than that.

Buffalo Thunder has a lot going for it. Located on the edge of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Santa Fe, Towa's 27 holes are a joy to play. Irwin and Bill Phillips both designed 18-hole layouts, but nine of Phillips' have been taken out of play. Towa operates the course as a series of three nines. With Hilton now in the mix, an infusion of cash, commitment, and service has elevated the golf to rank among the best in the area.

"We don't try to attract customers by hosting the Tour events," said Jeremy Hainline, Hilton's Corporate Director of golf sales. "We operate golf resorts like Buffalo Thunder for people who want to play a fun round of golf on a good course that's run by staff who are genuinely interested in taking great care of guests."

That's most evident on the Valley nine, which opens this month following an extensive renovation. A new golf course superintendent and a dedicated maintenance staff have produced lush fairways, thick rough and glassy greens that rival the best in the state. Irwin's design clugs up hills, down canyons and across arroyos, weaving seamlessly among piñon trees and desert sage. Green complexes end at rocky, red cliffs plucked right out of a John Wayne western. Irwin's sand bunkers mirror the shapes of the puffy white clouds that appear out of nowhere then just as quickly blow apart like milkweeds.

Except for the desert scenery – and the occasional rabbit – none of the 27 holes is typical desert golf. A carpet of green grass runs from tee to green which, from the distance, appears as if someone spray-painted thick stripes of green on the Earth's red clay.

"Santa Fe is a hot market for people from Dallas," said Rob Harper, the real estate developer who's Unity Hunt recently debuted an upscale second home community in the heart of downtown Santa Fe. If Santa Fe is your thing, it's worth checking out.

"This town has a relaxed, casual vibe. It's the shortest distance from Dallas that takes you the farthest away."

Unity Hunt's El Corazon de Santa Fe condominium project occupies a chunk of prime land near the heart of downtown's Plaza.

"Santa Fe is a huge market for second-home buyers," Harper said. "But what we discovered surprised us. Instead of owning a vacation home outright, people in their mid-40s like the idea of owning portion of a deedable property without the hassles of owning an entire second home."

So El Corazon converted 18 units of their top-shelf condominium project – slate floors, and rubbed Venetian plaster, skylights, fireplace – into fractional ownership and branded it the Residence Club at El Corazon de Santa Fe. Unlike timeshares though, each fractional owner purchases a 1/8 interest in an individual condo. In short, there are few restrictions for your \$130,000 investment. No blackout periods. No rental pool. As long as no other owner or his guests are using your condo at the time, you can use it.

Of course, the devil is in the details, but Harper's team has worked through many of those. Owners and their guests have access to restaurant discounts, use of a nearby spa and preferred green fees at Buffalo Thunder.

One final note: Whether you are staying at the Hilton or near the Plaza downtown, be sure to have dinner at Buffalo Thunder's Red Sage restaurant. Once-famed chef Mark Miller is back, and in a big way. Miller was once a preminent culinary force during the Southwestern craze years ago. His restaurants may have faltered, but his reinterpreted Red Sage is the best restaurant in Santa Fe.

Chef Christopher McLean runs the kitchen on a daily basis, drawing on Native American, Latin American, and regional ingredients to produce inventive cuisine like no one else. His corn and piñon-crusted Texas quail with roasted beets, smoky bacon and Meyer lemon vinaigrette is not to be missed. Neither should his buffalo short ribs, braised nearly forever, then served with sage polenta and a vibrant cherry-ancho chile salsa.

I'm betting with the money on this one: Santa Fe's golf, resort and second-home market looks to be smokin' hot.

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