

COURTESY OF CIRCLING RAVEN

# Embrace the differences

PICTURED: Circling Raven Golf Club

**Circling Raven and Kalispel, two very different courses owned by Native American tribes, make for one easy casino-golf trip**

By Jason Lusk SPOKANE, WASH., AND WORLEY, IDAHO

Six months of staring at the same four office walls creates an incontestable urge to see new, wildly different scenes – at least it did for this traveling golf writer. Central Florida wasn't a terrible place to ride out the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, but when it was time to get back on the road, the map came out and the ideas started rolling.

I was in need of a Monte Python moment: "And now for something completely different."

For a guy based near Orlando, what could be more different than eastern Washington and western Idaho? Mountains, big skies, giant Western evergreens – pack the medical masks, order the hand sanitizer, book the trip, I was on my way.

Speaking of different, it would be hard to find two highly rated courses within an hour's drive of each other that are more different than Circling Raven Golf Club and

Kalispel Golf and Country Club. Their disparities present an interesting set of options for traveling golfers.

First, a few similarities: Both have connections to Native American tribal casinos, are on lovely rolling terrain and are in immaculate condition. Each has 18 holes. That's about where the similarities end.

Circling Raven, ranked No. 19 on Golfweek's Best Casino Courses list for 2020 and No. 2 among all of Idaho's public-access tracks, is a wide-open affair across 620 acres surrounded by native prairies, wetlands, woodlands and wheat fields. Mountains rise in the distance, teasing of a very different landscape toward the massive Coeur d'Alene Lake, which is not in view but that stretches to within three miles of the course. Designed by Gene Bates and opened in 2003, Circling Raven sits comfortably within a classic western prairie aesthetic, a big ballpark with many individual holes isolated by ridges and tree lines. »



COURTESY OF KALISPEL

PICTURED: Kalispel Golf and Country Club



The two courses made for **very different but enjoyable rounds of golf** during a late-season trip to sample the casino-operated golf scene near Spokane, Washington.



### Kalispel

**Where:** Spokane, Washington; about half an hour's drive from Spokane International Airport and the Northern Quest Resort and Casino with which the course is affiliated

**The course:** 6,663 yards, par 72

**Designer:** Details are not precise, but World Golf Hall of Fame member Jim Barnes gets much of the nod for the 1910 layout, as he was the club pro at the time and was involved in creating the course after Spokane Country Club changed locations several times.

**Golfweek's Best rankings:** No. 31 among Best Casino Courses in the U.S.; No. 8 in Washington for Best Courses You Can Play public-access list



### Circling Raven

**Where:** Worley, Idaho; about an hour's drive from Spokane International Airport

**The course:** 7,189 yards, par 72

**Designer:** Gene Bates in 2003

**Changes coming:** Bates has developed a master plan for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe that includes a new 9 holes, enhanced practice facilities, several repositioned tees for the 10th hole and improvements to cart flow near the clubhouse. Several of these improvements should be completed before the course hosts a Symetra Tour event in 2021.

**Golfweek's Best rankings:** No. 19 among Best Casino Courses in the U.S.; No. 2 in Idaho for Best Courses You Can Play public-access list

The old-school Kalispel – ranked No. 31 on Golfweek's Best Casino Courses list – is on the opposite end of the spectrum. Narrow and tree-lined with many parallel fairways and some of the slickest greens imaginable, it pays homage to a time when golf balls didn't travel so far and were perhaps launched with more care. Compared to Circling Raven, this 110-year-old layout is a much more intimate affair.

The two courses made for very different but enjoyable rounds of golf during a late-season trip to sample the casino-operated golf scene near Spokane, Washington.

I played Circling Raven with my head on a swivel. The earth seems to stretch out in all directions, with miles of yellow grasses stretching to the Coeur d'Alene Mountains, part of the Bitterroot Range of the Rockies. It's a visual treat, crossing ridges between greens and tees to see the next hole framed in one of three distinct environments:

woodlands, wetlands and Palouse – a geologic term involving wind-blown hills, moguls and fertile sandy soil.

When the Coeur d'Alene Tribe searched for an architect to build a golf course near its namesake and recently upgraded casino resort in Worley, Idaho, there was an expectation the course might be situated on a ridgetop south of the resort. Bates took them in a different direction – literally.

Bates preferred the more flowing land to the north and east of the casino for a layout that required crossing under a railroad track. The varied topography offered better chances to frame memorable holes with superior views among the rolling ridgelines.

"I went to the other side, where we had wetlands and all kinds of environmental challenges," Bates said. "We had some grass fields, a lot of timbered areas. I just said, this is where we need to be. It will be more challenging to build, but the results will be a heck of a lot more spectacular."

The tribe agreed, insisting only that the course preserve and serve the ancestral land with dignity. Bates was able to construct a 7,189-yard routing that moves between the three environs, incorporating stretches through wet areas with holes that climb into the Palouse hillsides before tumbling back into the trees.

"I just started going for a walk," Bates said of the inspiration for the layout. "Once we knew where we wanted the clubhouse, I walked and saw the area on the north side of the railroad tracks, and I knew there were several holes over there that would just fit in perfectly with the natural contours.

"The routing just fell into place. It's almost like going on a hike, or maybe following animal trails. That's just how the course is routed. ... It was almost easy, not complicated."

Seven of the holes – five on the front and two on the back nine – are south and west of the railway in a zone with more trees and water, but it's the other 11 holes northeast of the tracks where the course stretches its legs. The scale of the place opens dramatically on that side, with holes scattered into the best parcels. It's not a track built for walkers, with sometimes significant cart rides between holes, but each hole fits into the giant terrain as if it >>

**RIGHT:** Circling Raven

was simply uncovered.

And as already mentioned, it couldn't play a whole lot more differently than Kalispel.

Formerly named Spokane Country Club, the course – laid out by four-time major championship winner Jim Barnes in 1910 and updated in 1988 by Robert Muir Graves – was purchased by the Kalispel Tribe in 2015. Capital investment followed, and the course is in immaculate shape today. Site of the inaugural U.S. Women's Open in 1946 (won by Patty Berg), Kalispel gallivants across the hills north of Spokane alongside the Little Spokane River.

And while Circling Raven presents many wide-open views, Kalispel requires



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a laser focus. Holes curve through pines and evergreens lining the fairways, daring a player to hit driver but often rewarding a more prudent tee shot.

At 6,663 yards the course isn't long by modern standards, but the elevation

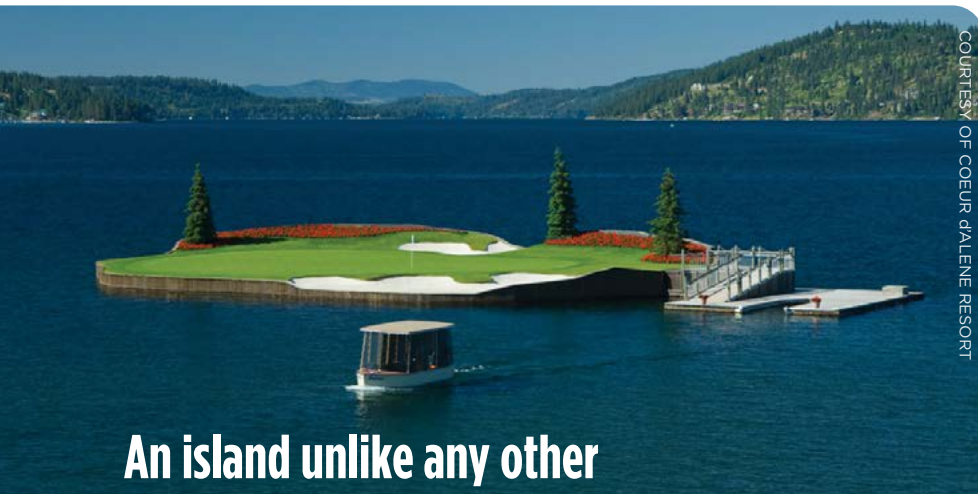
changes and tightness add effective yardage. The devilish bent greens are as pure and fast as can be found anywhere, making it critical to hit approach shots from the fairways instead of trying to carve a shot through the trees.

Also unlike Circling Raven, which operates as a daily-fee resort, Kalispel has a large membership – the course is open to outside play for golfers who stay at the tribe's Northern Quest Resort and Casino. That makes it a limited public-access course with a private vibe – always fun, akin to being invited to see somebody else's personal playground.

This first-timer was paired with Kalispel veterans Greg Deckard, his son Ryan Deckard and Dave Vose, who shared the layout's history and strategic challenges along the way. And their excitement for the tee shot on the downhill, par-5 16th was palpable. The tee shot launches through a chute in the trees and off a ridgeline, crossing a road before the fairway sharply turns almost 90 degrees to the right. In all, the hole drops more than 100 feet from tee to green.

I was looking for something different, and this was a perfect example of the whole experience. And while the two courses couldn't be much more disparate, both are undoubtedly worth checking out – one wide open, the other tight with a different set of challenges. For anybody headed to this stretch of the West, either would make a fun experience.

But why settle for just one when all these differences are within an hour's drive of each other? **Gwk**



COURTESY OF COEUR D'ALENE RESORT

## An island unlike any other

About half an hour's drive north of Circling Raven is Coeur d'Alene Resort, which offers a fun and famous anomaly: a massive floating green on the par-3 14th.

Designed by Scott Miller, the fun resort layout ranks No. 3 in Idaho on Golfweek's Best Courses You Can Play List. The course features several

photogenic par 3s above Lake Coeur d'Alene, with the island green undoubtedly the star of that show.

The island green weighs more than 4 million pounds and is connected to underwater cables that allow it to be moved. It typically plays anywhere from about 100 yards off the forward tees all

the way to 220 off the tips. The base of the green – to which players travel in a small boat named Putter – is made of concrete cells and Styrofoam. The structure is 55 yards wide and 35 yards front to back.

A diver fishes out the balls that miss the green, as many as 40,000 of them each year.

– Jason Lusk