

CASCADE GOLFER

Kittitas County's famous coal mines are getting a second life this summer in a new golf course and winery at Suncadia Resort

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<http://www.cascadegolfer.com/news/diamond-in-the-rough/>



I've come to Roslyn, Wash., to visit a brand new golf course and winery opening at the nearby Suncadia Resort, but I can't pull myself away from the city cemetery.

It's the names that jump out at you first — Tomac, Muratti, Dragecevic, Mattila, Peccignino, Crosetti. These were immigrant families, drawn to Roslyn from the major east coast ports in the first half of the 20th century by the promise of a decent job and a good wage in the Tumble Creek coal mines. For 80 years, the mines employed thousands of workers, who rode the ropes deep into the Cascade Mountain slopes and endured cramped conditions, stifling heat and poisonous sulfuric gases to extract the "black diamonds" for transport to Puget Sound and other points west.

The city cemetery, with acres of old, weathered headstones dedicated to the Slovaks, Italians, Croatians and thousands of others who gave their lives to the mines, is at once tragic and inspirational — a hard illustration of the crushing difficulty of life in the mines, and yet a

powerful reminder of the promise and opportunity that sparked the great western migration of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the sacrifices men were willing to make in pursuit of the American dream.

Today's residents of Roslyn are largely the children and grandchildren of those first settlers, trying as best they can to hold on to their history in the face of inevitable change. The once-bustling downtown – featured in the 1990s series “Northern Exposure” – is quiet on a Friday afternoon, “closed” signs hanging in the windows of all but a few of the cafes, handmade clothing shops and other small businesses that occupy the century-old, two-story wood buildings at the town center.

World War II took much of the town's population; the closing of the mines in the early 1960s took almost all of the rest. The couple hundred homes on the surrounding slopes are mostly empty this time of day, their 1,017 residents drawn — like their ancestors — to other places in search of work. This is a town that deserves some good news.

Two miles up the road, at the Suncadia Resort, it's once again the names that jump out at you. Not the names of any people, but those on the street signs — Tumble Creek Drive, Larkspur Loop, Coal Mine Way. Built directly on top of the old mines, the resort pays homage to the land's heritage at every turn. In addition to the street names, buildings throughout the property showcase photographs and artifacts from the mining period, while much of the old infrastructure — including closed-up mine shaft entrances and foundations for many of the original buildings — has been preserved, complete with permanent markers highlighting the property's history.

JELD-Wen Enterprises bought the land that would become Suncadia from the Plum Creek Timber Company in 1996, and in partnership with Lowe Enterprises immediately began planning a major resort, Washington's answer to the company's already successful Sunriver Resort in Oregon.

The next decade marked the real estate equivalent of the coal boom of the previous century — as the value of the land skyrocketed, plans for the resort expanded to include a spa, lodge, inn, self-contained village of shops and restaurants, plus three championship golf courses, a fully-stocked trout lake and miles of hiking and biking trails. It would all be paid for by the sale of over 3,000 homesites, condominiums and cabins — the values of which were undergoing the most dramatic rise in American history.

Prospector, the first of the resort's two planned public courses, opened in 2004 with an Arnold Palmer design and the promise of attracting thousands of tourists and vacation residents per year, visitors who would no doubt pour their money into the local communities of Roslyn and Cle Elum just as the thousands of visiting miners had in the previous century. A private development with higher-end homes and its own exclusive Tom Doak golf course, Tumble Creek, opened shortly thereafter.

Still in its beginning stages of development, Suncadia was giving the local communities their largest boom in 50 years, and was already among the largest employers in Kittitas County, second only to Central Washington University. People in Roslyn and Cle Elum were working

again, tourists were bringing in money, and possibilities for future development were limited only by the size of the real estate bubble.

Oh yeah, the real estate bubble.

Driving up to the all-new Swiftwater Cellars winery at Suncadia Resort, which opened last September and will house the pro shop, restaurant and clubhouse for the resort's brand-new Rope Rider course being opened this summer, you could almost imagine that you've gone back in time to those halcyon days.

The golf course, begun in 2005, was largely abandoned when the real estate market crashed, leaving hundreds of Suncadia homes unoccupied and limiting the resort's investment in a third course to the minimum needed to keep the property viable for future development. Paralleling the main road that leads from the highway to the Prospector Golf Course and lodging, Rope Rider's 11th hole sat like a monument to the recession for more than three years, slowly being overrun by weeds and wildlife and serving as a constant reminder of the boom days of yore and the resort's grand ambition.

Today, the 11th hole is alive with activity. Workers drain the spring snow runoff from the area around the tee, while others sand the bunkers, seed the fairways and recondition the greens. What was just eight months ago a painful reminder of better times has been transformed into the fun and challenging risk-reward par-5 it was meant to be.

A quarter mile away sits the resort's newest crown jewel, the 41,000-square foot Swiftwater Cellars winery. Built literally above the entrance to the No. 9 and No. 10 mines, Swiftwater represents the logical pinnacle of the decade-long growth of the golf and wine industries in Washington state — an ambitious, elegant winery that will serve as the clubhouse for a similarly ambitious destination golf course.

Two of the largest construction projects in the county at the time they were completed in 2009 and 2010 — and now two major employers as well — Swiftwater Cellars and Rope Rider Golf Course are combining to breathe a second life into Suncadia Resort and the communities of Roslyn and Cle Elum, and becoming a must-stop pin in the map for our state's thousands of golf and wine tourists.

“One of the things that really drew us to this site was the chance to do something unique in Washington state,” says Swiftwater Cellars owner Don Watts. “There are plenty of places where there are wineries close to golf courses, or close to destination resorts, but this is the only location where you can go to a resort, play a great round of golf, then walk right off the 18th hole and into the winery.

“It's going to be the nicest 19th hole in the state of Washington.”

It was Watts who first saw the potential for the partnership. A farmer and vineyard owner from Paterson, Wash., Watts had long dreamed of building a winery of his own, and upon selling his farm in 2008, decided the time was finally right. Furthermore, he knew that the Suncadia

property — with its prime location off I-5 just 80 miles from Seattle and a steady stream of permanent residents, year-round tourists and vacation home owners — would make an ideal location.

Suncadia, meanwhile, was making investments of its own. As the housing market began to turn for the better in 2009, with new construction returning and signs that the worst of the recession might be passing, the resort decided to push ahead with the further development of the Rope Rider Golf Course, and brought in PGA star and noted course architect Peter Jacobsen to complete the design and ready the course for a 2011 opening.

It didn't take long for Watts, who wanted to build a winery, and Suncadia, which needed a clubhouse for its new golf course, to realize the significance of their mutual interests.

“It's a perfect marriage for us,” says Jared Jeffries, the Tumble Creek Club manager, who has been at the resort since 2004 and has been heavily involved in the day-to-day development of Rope Rider. Suncadia sold acreage to Watts to build Swiftwater Cellars, and in return, Watts leases part of the building back to Suncadia to use for Rope Rider's pro shop, cart storage and other golf course operations.

“Mr. Watts' vision for a winery that embraced the coal mining history around Rope Rider, and also provided us a beautiful golf shop, was an unbelievable opportunity,” Jeffries says. “We sold Don a parcel that we were planning to invest money into to build a clubhouse, and he turned it into a beautiful property that we can market as an added amenity to the resort.”

It was a no-brainer for Watts as well, who has turned the winery into a true family affair. His son, Donnie, is the winery's general manager, and wife Lori and son Derek are both involved in the business as well.

“When the idea was first suggested, all I could think was, ‘That's brilliant,’” Watts says. “Now not only do we get our normal traffic coming through to visit the winery, we get an additional 20,000 to 30,000 golfers coming through the winery and calling this their 19th hole. It's a great match.”

In addition to the pro shop, Swiftwater Cellars includes a full-service restaurant, indoor and outdoor banquet areas capable of hosting meetings, weddings or corporate events, private dining rooms, a comfortable lodge-style sitting room, and — of course — a tasting room where visitors can sample pours from the winery's No. 9 and Swiftwater Cellars wines, all of which are produced on-site. Grapes are crushed each fall right outside the restaurant doors, then barrel-aged for up to two years in temperature-controlled rooms directly below winery's main sitting room. Swiftwater produces primarily red wines, including Bordeaux blends and Watts' personal favorite — pinot noir.

“We're the only winery in Washington state that gets pinot noir grapes from the Willamette Valley in Oregon, which is known for producing some of the finest pinot noirs in the world,” Watts says. “It's a difficult grape to work with, but if you get the right people who know what they're doing, it's incredible.”

Since Swiftwater Cellars officially opened in September of 2010, the winery has already seen a significant amount of business from vacationers, locals and special events at its Hoist House Restaurant — named after the building that housed the machinery used to bring the coal-laden mine cars, and the miners themselves, the hundreds of feet back to the surface from the depths of the No. 9 and No. 10 mines. The foundations of the original hoist house sit untouched today, just a few steps from the winery's front door.

That's part of the preservation of the area's history that was important to Suncadia developers when they signed the deal with Watts to build Swiftwater Cellars. Relics of the old No. 9 and No. 10 mines are everywhere, from black-and-white photographs that line the winery's hallways, to helmets and tools donated by area residents, to the building's architecture, featuring exposed wooden beams and doorways that mimic the shaft entrances. The winery even named its secondary label, No. 9, after the old mine, the last of the mines to close in the 1960s.

"This land was basically abandoned for decades before Suncadia came in," says Miranda Porterfield, the winery's director of marketing and membership. "Most of the people who live here are descendants of those mine workers, and the resort has given them a place where they can come and feel a connection with that time. We have employees and guests who tell us all the time how their grandfather or another relative worked in the coal mines, and how neat it is to have a place to come to that honors that heritage."

Just out the back doors of the winery is an expansive patio including outdoor seating, a fire pit, and one of the signature views of the entire resort – Tipple Hill, a massive pile of coal tailings (crushed rock left over after the coal it held has been extracted) that will certainly be Rope Rider's most definitive feature. The hill backdrops a view of Rope Rider's first and ninth fairways – and a championship No. 1 tee box high above the fairway below, which can only be accessed from Swiftwater's patio.

"We call it 'Don's Tee,'" laughs Jeffries, in reference to Watts. "I don't know how many people will go up there and try it, but it will be a lot of fun for those that do."

Just like the winery, the golf course pays tribute to the miners who first shaped the land on which it is built. Jeffries explains that a "rope rider" was the lead miner, who kept one hand on a rope while piloting the car deep into the shaft, and sent signals back to the hoist house to speed up, slow down or pull the miners out. Jeffries says that seven of the original rope riders who worked the No. 9 and No. 10 mines still live in the area today, and that plans are in the works to honor them as part of the course's grand opening in August. Plans are also being finalized to name each of the holes on the course after one of the rope riders (living and deceased), and to include a plaque or other permanent monument at each tee box with their name and brief life story.

"It's just another way that we can embrace the history of the property," he says.

Driving around the course, it's evident that Rope Rider will appeal to a different player than Suncadia's other public track, Prospector. That's by design, says Jeffries.

“It was always the intention to have the two courses complement each other, and offer a different experience to golfers,” he says. “With Prospector, we wanted to create a signature mountain course that would challenge golfers and reward good shotmaking. At Rope Rider, we wanted to provide a challenge to the best golfers who opt to play the course from the longer tees, but a fun experience for younger or beginning golfers as well.”

Seven-time PGA Tour winner Peter Jacobsen, whose Jacobsen-Hardy Golf Course Design company is responsible for award-winning courses at Brasada Ranch and Salishan in Oregon, was handed the task of meeting that demand, while staying in a footprint already determined years in advance.

Driving up the fairway of the 501-yard (from the blues) par-5 5th hole, Jeffries illustrates how Jacobsen met those unique challenges.

“This hole is a great example of what this course will be about,” he says. “There are three tees over 500 yards, with the back tee over 560, so it’s every bit the par-5 you’re ever going to want.”

But, as we approach the green, Jeffries stops and points to a flat space about 160 yards from the putting surface. It’s a special youth tee, giving young and beginning golfers the chance to experience the fun and challenge of playing a real course, without the frustration or impact on pace of play that can come from taking 12-15 shots per hole. There are youth tees on every hole, ranging from 80-160 yards.

“The youth tees are positioned to take away a lot of the fairway bunkers and other hazards,” Jeffries says. “Those will be in play for the good player, but for the youngster who is out here playing, it’s not going to be an issue.”

Rope Rider’s design also allows for the option to play holes one through six as a six-hole loop, or holes seven through nine as a three-hole loop. Jeffries says that those options will be available to golfers in the afternoons, once the 18-hole players have cleared those tee boxes, and are expected to be popular with families and golfers looking to get in a little practice late in the day.

“The youth tee boxes, and the option to play the shorter loops, gives young players the chance to experience the fun of being out on a real golf course, without the frustration that can come from a long, slow day on the course,” Jeffries says. “Hopefully they’ll walk away feeling confident and excited about their experience.”

That 7-8-9 loop will be a memorable one for better players, as well. The three holes wrap all the way around Tipple Hill, teeing off from just below Swiftwater Cellars on the 425-yard, par-4 seventh, ducking behind the hill for the 156-yard, par-3 eighth, then coming back towards the winery on what will be the front side’s signature hole, the 359-yard par-4 ninth. With Tipple Hill (which will be in bounds on all holes) dominating the foreground along the right side of the fairway and Swiftwater Cellars rising proudly atop the ridge behind the green, the ninth – which sits directly above the No. 9 mine shaft – sums up in a single image the area’s past, present and future.

The back nine offers yet another signature No. 10 to pair with Prospector's epic 10th hole – another relatively short par-4 from an elevated tee, though not quite as sweeping in grandeur as its older sibling – followed by the aforementioned 11th, where the first major water feature of the course comes into play to the right of the green.

After a varied and fun five-hole stretch including 187- and 128-yard par-3s, and par-4s ranging from 338-413 yards, the course turns for home at the par-5 17th, at 515 yards from the blues (580 from the back) the longest of Rope Rider's holes and one that will play directly into the prevailing afternoon wind. Then comes the finishing hole, a dogleg-right, 340-yard par-4 (from the whites) that includes the only forced carry on the entire course, a 200-220-yard poke over a deep blue pond running the entire length of the right side.

“This is going to be a fun finishing hole,” Jeffries says. “If you're playing in a tournament, and you're a stroke or two down, you'll have the option of playing straight over the lake towards the green to try and make up a shot or two at the end. But you'd better have something left in the tank.”

Throughout our drive around the golf course, Jeffries points out lots where homes are being built, or where construction is about to begin.

“Three years ago, new home construction slowed around the unfinished holes,” he says. “Now that we have completed construction of the course, things are starting to come back. We have many new homes that have broken ground this year, and we sold more properties, in terms of volume, in 2010 than in any previous year at Suncadia. And a lot of the people who bought lots previously are deciding that now is the time to build.

“Opening this golf course, and the winery, is a sign to everyone in the community that Suncadia is in a good position going forward.”

The golf course will have a soft opening later this summer (in fact, the Puetz Golf Shootout on July 23, part of the seven-event Cascade Golfer Cup, will be the first public tournament ever held on the course) before an official grand opening in conjunction with Suncadia's annual Wine in the Pines event the last weekend of August. Peter Jacobsen will conduct a clinic on Aug. 26, followed by a crab feed at the Suncadia Ampitheater. The following day, captains from the Discovery Channel's “Deadliest Catch” will participate in a fun tournament, while Swiftwater Cellars will feature celebrity seminars and a Grand Gala with a chance to meet select winemakers from around the region, and sample pours from 50 of the region's top wineries – in addition to Swiftwater's own, of course. All of the events are open to the public, with tickets available online at ticketswest.com.

As he talks about the grand opening, Jeffries looks down the long slope from the first tee to Tipple Hill and the No. 1 and No. 9 fairways below. The sun has shifted over the course of the day and the ridgetop winery now casts a long shadow over the 9th green, the two together as fitting a marker to the memory of the No. 9 mine as any found at Roslyn Cemetery for the thousands of miners who sought the American dream inside its walls.

“I think everyone in the area is pretty excited about the course,” Jeffries says. “Don is bringing in jobs, building homes is bringing in jobs, the course is bringing in jobs. Hopefully the whole region is getting back on its feet.”

The symbolism of Suncadia’s resurgence in the context of the area’s boom-to-bust past isn’t lost on Donnie Watts either.

“The wine and food and golf in this area are certainly remarkable, but for a lot of people, what is most important is that connection to the local history,” he says. “This area exists because of those families who came here to make a living in the mines. Without those people, none of this would be here. That’s why it’s so important to us to help preserve that history and tell those stories, and give those families the chance to give that history — that is so personal to them and such a rich part of this region — a new life.”

Washington state is rich with wine-and-golf pairings. While they may not be at one location like Swiftwater Cellars and Rope Rider, here are some other winery-course combos that make for a delightful — and delicious — trip, whether going for a day, or for a weekend.