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Golf Resorts Change Course to Attract Younger Generation

By **MARTHA C. WHITE** AUG. 4, 2014

Golf resorts have a Generation Y problem. Young adults do not flock to the fairway the way baby boomers did, and young business travelers are disinclined to commit four or five hours to a single game.

From 1996 through last year, the average age of a hotel guest rose by roughly a year, to 46; during the same period, the average age of a hotel guest who played golf went up by two and a half years, to roughly 49, according to D.K. Shifflet and Associates, a tourism and travel research company. In 2013, only 22 percent of travelers under 33 played golf when they stayed at a resort, compared with 42 percent of baby boomers.

“They’re used to being in their group, and if their group isn’t on the golf course, they’re not going to go on the golf course,” said Chris Klauda, vice president for lodging research services at D.K. Shifflet.

“Meeting people my own age, they end up being surprised that I golf,” said T. C. Green, a New York City business analyst who organizes golf outings for young professionals. Mr. Green, 31, said participants had told him they were glad to find a group of like-minded people their own age. “I get that all the time,” he said. “Now people have a venue to meet other people who golf.”

Mr. Green acknowledged that he was in the minority, though. “I’ve been looking for different ways to get people to come out,” he said.

Resorts are pondering that question, too, making changes that would have been unthinkable even a decade ago, adding speakers to golf carts and Wi-Fi access on the course, building high-tech training centers and miniature golf putting courses, and peppering corporate golf events with tangentially related

activities like using golf clubs to hit marshmallows or throwing Frisbees around the course.

“The golf industry as a whole has really been focused on millennials of late,” said Jon Last, president of Sports and Leisure Research Group, referring to travelers under 35.

“Certainly, they’re our up-and-coming customers,” said Abby Messick, head golf professional at the Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay Golf Resort, Spa and Marina in Cambridge, Md. Activities like night contests where participants wear necklaces that glow in the dark will become more prevalent, she predicted. “These programs are things you will see frequently popping up everywhere,” she said. “We have to change the face of golf.”

Robert Miller, partner at 54 Sports, a sports entertainment firm, said: “They’re a lot more apt now to include an on-course contest element. Whereas several years ago, resorts wouldn’t have catered to that.”

The hope is that at least some guests who start by swinging at marshmallows or glow sticks will eventually come to enjoy playing real golf and return to the resort where they were introduced to the sport.

Striking a balance between wooing young and casual golfers while keeping older, more tradition-bound players happy is a delicate task for resorts with identities tied to the game. But the risk of driving away purists is overridden by the need to compete for an emerging demographic.

“At the end of the day, our golf courses are geared toward folks that golf, so we don’t want to alienate our purists or people that play golf on a regular basis,” said Larry Auth, regional director of sales and marketing for Omni Hotels and Resorts. For groups, since guests’ interests and skill levels vary, Omni standardized a “menu” of golf-related games and activities across its golf resorts.

“We wanted to package it under one brand,” Mr. Auth said.

Catering to younger travelers means also catering to their attachment to mobile devices.

The Rosewood CordeValle, in San Martin, Calif., which has hosted P.G.A. tournaments and will be the site of the 2016 United States Women’s Open, started letting players bring cellphones onto the course in 2010 — a change many tradition-bound courses have resisted. Two years ago, it expanded its wireless network so players would have Internet access throughout the course’s 260 acres.

“With our location in Silicon Valley, our age demographic has dropped four years over the last two years,” said Jeff Holland, the resort’s director of sales and marketing. And the resort plans to add an 18-hole putting course — miniature golf without windmills and cartoonish facades — next year to cater to novice players, young families and corporate groups.

Adding mini-golf at a resort that hosts championships might sound odd, but CordeValle will not be the first. Pinehurst Resort, in North Carolina, the host of the 2014 United States Open and United States Women’s Open, did so in 2012.

Sea Island, a resort in Georgia, made a bid for younger players by adding a third hotel, the Inn at Sea Island, in February. Rates there are less than half those at Sea Island’s other two properties, which has helped draw younger guests, said Brannen Veal, golf director at the resort.

“We definitely have seen more younger golfers,” Mr. Veal said. Appealing to younger adults via their wallets has succeeded elsewhere. At the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort in Naples, Fla., which waived its \$85 equipment rental fee for guests in 2012, use of equipment by those under 35 increased about 30 percent.

In May, Sea Island reopened a renovated and expanded center for golf fitness and instruction, an 8,000-square-foot facility where the resort’s pros use tools like video analysis and 3-D imaging to help golfers improve. Mr. Veal said it was too soon to tell if the high-tech tools would appeal to younger adults, but he said the response to similar centers at other hotels had been positive.

The Ritz-Carlton opened a training center in Naples, including equipment like 3-D cameras that turn the user into an avatar, in 2012, and 20 percent to 25 percent of its clients are young adults.

Even pro shops are getting makeovers. At the Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay Golf Resort, Ms. Messick, the golf professional, said that it added gifts, bags and jewelry to its inventory to appeal to guests who do not play. “The hope is that this is an introduction,” Ms. Messick said. “Hopefully we can pull them in, get them involved and at least have them shopping in our stores, hitting balls at our driving range.”

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