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Cassique: A course that has personality

The Lowcountry comes into play after a links-style front nine

By BOB SPEAR
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Look out onto the first hole of the Kiawah Island Club's Cassique course and a sea of sand stares back. The white faces of nine bunkers framed by green present an unsettling look.

What hath Watson wrought?

Do not be dismayed; though commanding attention, the opening scene is more for show than challenge. Tom Watson has merely set the stage for something special on the 18-hole trip that covers about 7,000 yards across tomato fields and the marshes of the Kiawah River.

There could be no better person than Watson, who won five British Opens, to bring a slice of links golf to the Lowcountry, and the course that opened less than 12 ago offers that rare combination of challenge and fun. In addition to offering the sights and feel of Scotland and Ireland, the course winds its way through forests and along marshes toward the Kiawah River's meeting with the Atlantic Ocean and back to a demanding finishing hole.

"Cassique has a classic feel and really offers three courses in one," said Alli Jarrett, tournament director of 2009 U.S. Mid-Amateur at Cassique. "It's a fun golf course to play and a fun golf course to set up, especially in trying to identify a national champion."

"Fun" often finds its way into conversations involving Cassique. Watson used the word at the course's grand opening, and Charlie Arrington, Kiawah Partners' director of design and planning, chooses the same description in describing the entire project.

"I had more fun working with that project than any of the others," said Arrington, whose credentials include landscaping and golf course architecture. "Tom believes golf should be fun, and that's what we wanted Cassique to be."

Of course, getting from the flat tomato fields to the rolling terrain of the links look — especially holes 1-10 — required moving some dirt — more than 1 million cubic yards, Cassique pro Martin Shorter said.

"To create the natural look, they laid out the holes and allowed (the property) to sit for two months," Shorter said. "The wind shaped the fairways before they started any of the grassing."

Said Arrington: "We thought, 'Let's let the wind shape the dunes and play golf over them.'"



The 9th fairway and green at Cassique. The course on Kiawah Island was designed by Tom Watson. It was Watson's original design in the U.S.. It is one of the few courses in the low country that features elevation changes. Front nine is a links-like course, with holes like you'd find in Ireland and Scotland. Cassique has hosted several big USGA events.

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About Cassique

LOCATION: 100 Old Cedar Lane, John's Island

HEAD PROFESSIONAL: Martin Shorter

YARDAGE: 7,060 yards, par 72

HOW TO PLAY IT: Cassique is part of the private Kiawah Island Club. Non-members must be a member's guest or sponsored by a member.

FAMOUS HOLES: The course features two routings for holes 4-6. On the "Pulpit" routing, the fourth is played to the right and is an uphill par 4, the fifth a short downhill par 3 and the sixth a dogleg left par 5 from a lower tee. On the "Nip 'n' Tuck" routing,

Watson incorporated features from famous links courses in the design. The second green reminds of the 16th at Turnberry, the sixth features the "Spectacles" from Carnoustie and Ballyunion's false front highlights the ninth. There are influences from Royal St. George's, St. Andrews and Royal Dornoch, too.

"We didn't set out to build a top 100" in the nation course, Arrington said.

But that's what they did.

Different challenges

The Cassique experience will offer plenty of memories, and one guaranteed to be lasting is the routing of holes 4-6 — a par-4, a par-3 and a par-5. One routing called "Pulpit" plays uphill to No. 4, downhill to No. 5 and dogleg left from a lower tee to No. 6. The "Nip 'n' Tuck" routing goes low to its fourth green, up to the fifth and the sixth is a dogleg right from an elevated tee box.

Confused? Every golfer playing the course for the first time scratches his head and must rely on his caddie for direction.

"I loved the options in setting up those holes for the U.S. Mid-Amateur," Jarrett said. "You give the golfer different looks and that gives the players three completely different holes in different rounds. It's unique and really neat."

Arrington said the concept evolved from his days at Palmetto Dunes in Hilton Head. During the winter, with no golfers around, he and his colleagues would play the course backward.

"I told Bob Gibbons (Watson's on-site foreman) that one of my fantasies is to play a course in two different directions," Arrington said. "There are the fourth and fifth holes, we had enough land wide enough for two holes but not for four. I sent a routing sketch to Tom, and we thought about it and considered, 'Why not a reversible par-3?'"

"It has worked well, and we have an extra green in there, so we will always have 18 holes if we have to close one of the others for maintenance. Working through things like that is what made for a fun project."

Company officials wanted a different concept from the club's River Course, a design that marches through forests of oaks and pines.

They got the difference at Cassique, especially with the links look for the first 10 holes.

"You will never have a true links course, one like in Scotland and Ireland, in the southern United States," Arrington said. "You have to use bermuda grasses in the South and bermuda grasses require water and that keeps the ball from running like it does in Scotland and Ireland."

"Over there, the most bunkers are round, the courses are dry and the ball runs into them. A lot of the bunkers (at Cassique) are more visual for aiming purposes."

But Cassique does have the wind that can impact every shot and the course does have the "look," and the result is combination to envy.

More at-home feel

A touch of Lowcountry golf follows the links start and water comes back into play on the finishing holes. Shorter calls the 14th "the prettiest hole framed by goal-post pines," and the 18th is a brute, a 435-yard par with a three-tiered green guarded by water.

A key factor: the developers focused first on the golf course. There is no real estate on the front nine and that on the back nine is well back.

"That's what makes it so very special to me," Shorter said.

Cassique has been special to a lot of golfers. A members' course, the club has played host to six national and regional tournaments for both pros and amateurs. Retief Goosen, Woody Austin and Peter Lonard set the course record, 7-under 65, in the 20023 Pro-Celebrity Challenge.

Shorter remembers Sergio Garcia's driving over the marsh and reaching the 310-yard 17th in the Pro-Celebrity and Bill Haas, then a collegian, doing the same on the 300-plus yard eighth in the 2003 Palmer Cup.

To compliment a special golf course is a special clubhouse, which is designed to be reminiscent of a 19th century

the fourth plays to the left on a par 4, the fifth is an uphill par 3 and the sixth is a dogleg right par 5 from an elevated tee.

FUN FACT: Cassique is named for the multi-lingual Kiawah Indians chief who guided English settlers in 1670 to what would become Charlestowne.

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English country manor inspired by the styling of architect Charles Voysey. The clubhouse offers views of the golf course and marshes, and the interior features restored antique doors, original art work and conference rooms.

Look up and part of the ceiling features some old-fashioned clubs. The Tom Watson room, of course, features the course architect and pictures of his British Open triumphs. Chef Tom Colicchio of Manhattan's Gramercy Tavern and Craft restaurants designed the menu and members claim the dining is the finest in Charleston.

"We had a beautiful piece of property and we wanted quality for both the golf course and the clubhouse," Arrington said. "We're very proud of it."

They have good reasons to be.

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