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GOLF & GAMING

Boardwalks & Birdies

story by Vic Williams

Forget the Bad Rap and Hurricane Hangover,
Atlantic City is Golf Vacation Must

You know it's gonna be a good trip when the guy who loads your travel bag in the back of a shuttle car starts rattling off the fine golf courses in your future within minutes of pulling onto the highway and pointing it to your destination — in this case Atlantic City.

Turns out the guy is retired cop. He lives on a golf course and has played many a handsome track up and down the south Jersey shore, and has for decades. He's seen the storms come and go, the economic challenges, the construction booms and backoffs. He's seen it all, and nothing has dimmed his view.

"For the money and the quality, it's as good as anywhere I've been," he says. "I came from New York a long time ago and still love living and playing golf here."

He's not the only one. There's a lot for visitors to love, too. It's only 65 miles to Philadelphia International airport.

Atlantic City's Vegas-like hotels sit cheek-by-jowl with remnants of the old town circa *Boardwalk Empire*.

Outstanding restaurants range from tiny local hovels to flashy casino gorgefests.

Friendly locals are everywhere — behind the wheel, behind the bar or at the first tee.

And yeah, the golf is damned good.

For a 30-year Nevadan more than used to the casino culture, finally strolling the famed Boardwalk for the first time in his five-plus decades on the planet, most of these revelations were half-expected despite the caveats one hears over the years. Maybe those of a certain age tend to look upon the "AC" through a worn-out mid-1970s lens, when the town reached its nadir as a destination before legalized gaming led its slow-but-steady resurgence that continues today. Maybe some Northeasterners just can't bring themselves to look beyond, say, Myrtle Beach or

Links With A Past

Atlantic City Country Club's history stretches back more than 100 years, but Tom Doak gave it a modern yet classic boost at the turn of the 21st century.



Ocean City, Maryland, for an injection of fresh fairways and watery views. Maybe they'd rather just visit their friendly local Native American-run hotel-casino. Nothing wrong with that — but there's still something about strolling the Boardwalk as the Atlantic churns just over the dunes in one direction and the high-rise jumble of colorful facades and bright lights beckon in the other. In high season or on any weekend afternoon you'll dodge a lot of joggers and cyclers on your way from the Tropicana to Caesars, Bally's to Trump Taj Mahal, past the piers and souvenir shops, condos and saltwater taffy emporia, all the way to the sleek and new Revel. A few panhandlers and, er, businesswomen, too, but far fewer than back in the day.

It's good fun, it's quintessential America, it's potent with history. Atlantic City retains a certain old-school resonance even with all the recent public and private revitalization efforts spearheaded by a fiery speech from Gov. Chris Christie a few years back during a high-powered pow wow among community and business representatives. "He knew what to say," says Grace Hanlon, executive director of New Jersey's travel & tourism division. "He had good ideas of what we needed to do."

Despite stiff competition from neighboring states, especially Pennsylvania, Atlantic City is on the upswing. When you factor in the amazingly diverse, accessible and often historic array of golf courses, it's got much more going for it than golfers might realize, enough to warrant a

weeklong jag that, with some planning assistance from local golf consortium like *PlayACGolf.com*, will land this town on your annual buddy-trip short list.

So which courses to include? A couple dozen are worthy candidates; seven area courses are ranked among the Garden State's Top 10 public offerings. During the high spring-summer season, it's easy to pack five of them into four days.

Start with Shore Gate, a muscular, forested, bunker-laden layout in rural Ocean View, about 45 minutes south of Atlantic City. West Coast-based architects Ron Fream and David Dale made maximum use of the region's sandy soil, framing fairways and greens in stacks of blowout bunkers jigsawed against the deep woods. Second and third shots to elevated, larger-than-average greens are the standard at Shore Gate. Water hazards abound and club selection is paramount, making it probably the stoutest challenge of the week — one birdie vs. a slew of bogeys (or worse) for a certain 10-handicapper. Good thing it was gorgeous, too, hewing tightly to Fream and Dale's naturalistic, environmentally sound design ethic.

An hour north, a few miles west of the casinos and Boardwalk, resides the core of Atlantic City's golf trail; indeed, you can build a solid three- or four-day trip around these eight or so courses.

Seaview Golf Club boasts two full-length layouts sporting deep design pedigrees — Donald Ross' relatively



RON JAWORSKI'S BLUE HERON PINES

short-but-spectacular Bay Course and Howard Toomey and William Flynn's Pines Course. Both are in invariably great shape thanks to Troon Golf's well-known conditioning acumen, and with the Stockton Seaview Hotel right there onsite and plenty of great restaurants nearby (including the down-home but surprisingly gourmet Oyster Creek Inn, located at the end of a fishing road and boasting all kinds of fresh seafood, from lobster to sushi), you can make it your home base if you'd rather not sleep among the slot machines and glitz of downtown.

Bordering Reeds Bay with views of the AC skyline from several holes (the back nine, especially, is rife with photo ops), Seaview's aptly named addition to the vaunted Ross canon is a pure old-school treat, its wider-than-they-look fairways negotiating canyons of tall reeds and gaggles of classic bunkers, touching on copses of trees and skirting wetlands, with those familiar domed and dastardly Ross greens the clear star of the show. Hole 12 seems a drivable pushover from the tee, but even a short pitch into the tiny putting surface — which resembles an elongated bell in shape — is anything but easy. It's the old architect's genius encapsulated. No. 16 is another two-shotter treat (check out the pencil-narrow fairway bunker), while 17 is one of the area's prettiest little 3-pars. "Fun" doesn't begin to cover it,

which is probably one reason the LPGA Tour stops here every year. And it rolls into the 2014 season with some welcome tweaks on several holes to make Seaview even more of a must.

Farther south is a collection of well-known and popular public courses including Ballamor (ranked the region's best in recent years) and Twisted Dune, a links-style routing conjured out of a triangle of dense pine barren forest a little over a decade ago. Nearly treeless and distinguished by vast waste bunkers, surprising elevation changes and forced carries over scrub, sand and water — most effectively on holes 15 and 16, as stirring a par 3-4 pairing as you'll find in south Jersey — the course has that "modern minimalist" feel though several million acres of earth were moved to bring it alive. When it's in top condition and the huge greens are up to speed, Twisted Dune delivers.

Then there's Blue Heron Pines, the lone AC entry in former Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Ron Jaworski's growing Garden State golf management company. Located a couple 5-pars from Atlantic City's regional airport, it's the perfect first or last stop in a traveling golfer's itinerary — fairly flat but loaded with memorable holes thanks to local architect Steven Kay's stylish, classical design. The Pines is known for Augusta-like conditioning with greens that

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THE TROPICANA ON ATLANTIC CITY BOARDWALK

roll true and smooth. By the time you reach the course's strongest stretch, holes 13-16 — with the memorable par-5 14th leading the way — you'll find yourself wondering, "How can it get any better?"

Then it does, at the area's oldest and most storied venue, Atlantic City Country Club. Christened in 1897 with a William Flynn layout, tweaked over the decades and finally brought to its current glory by Tom Doak in 2000 after the Hilton Corporation acquired it — it's now owned by the Caesars-Harrah's gaming conglomerate — the club exudes old-school charm and class. A visit to the spacious, hardwood-laden locker room casts an immediate pinch-me spell; check out the names gracing some lockers, from Al Capone to Arnold Palmer, who played here while stationed as a Coast Guard seaman in nearby Cape May in 1951, and take a gander at the photos lining the walls. You'll spot champions of three U.S. Women's Opens held there — Babe Didrickson Zaharias in 1948, Carol Mann in 1965 and Sandra Palmer in 1975 — and shots from the first-ever Senior Tour event held there in 1980 as well as the many celebs who've teed it up there, including Bob Hope. And the terms "birdie" and "eagle" were coined at ACCC, too.

The course itself is pure bliss to play. Where else does the first tee actually occupy a corner of the practice green?

And it just gets richer from there, with signature holes and shots rolling by like the puffy clouds sneaking in from the coastline. Though the course's original "bones" remain pretty much intact, Doak left his mark on virtually every hole. He shortened No. 2, lengthened No. 12, combined holes 10 and 11 into a tough par 5 and, most notably, created completely new holes at 14 and 15, which jut dramatically into the tidal marsh marking the course's eastern boundary. No. 17, meanwhile, could have been lifted whole from Royal Porthcawl in Wales or one of the British Open rota courses. It's a jewel in Atlantic City Country Club's 18-carat golfing crown. You won't want to leave.

But leave you must, hopefully heading back to the city's nightlife and gaming, its incredible array of eateries (the Borgota's Old Homestead Steakhouse and Tropicana's family-style Italian showcase Carmine's or sports-bar-on-roids Chickie & Pete's just three examples), its impressive entertaining lineup, its special events (including the return of the Miss America pageant, which takes place every September), and its overarching "Hey, we're back in a big way" vibe.

Some 90 years after the bootleggers and wiseguys ruled the roost, it's once again our time to shine on the Boardwalk and beyond, one tee at a time. ☐