



The view is stunning from the Seaview Resort's Bay Course.

ALL-IN ON GOLF

BY ROB DUCA

Atlantic City's strategy for attracting visitors now revolves around a surprising array of top-notch layouts

WHEN THE IDEA OF TRAVELING to Atlantic City for a golf junket was first broached, I thought, Excuse me? But after spending five days there and playing six rounds of golf at courses within approximately 30 minutes of the iconic boardwalk, I was left with a different question, who knew?

Who knew that the greater Atlantic City area was more than casinos, souvenir shops and tattoo parlors? Who knew it featured scenic, historic courses? Who knew that one could dine at superb restaurants, ranging from savory seafood at the Oyster Creek Inn Restaurant and Boat Bar to delicious steaks at the Borgata's Old Homestead Steakhouse and exquisite Italian food served family-style at Carmine's, located within the Tropicana Hotel?

Actually, not many people were aware of this until recently. For years, golf wasn't marketed. Casino operators preferred that nothing entice visitors away from the slot machines. In their ideal world, suckers would come to the casino, lose their money and trudge home.

But business models have changed since the 2008 recession. Casinos around the country have absorbed a significant hit in recent years, and local politicians began urging Atlantic City to promote its other attractions. With that, golf became a major focus.

Gambling on golf

Enter the Greater Atlantic City Golf Association, with 19 courses in its arsenal. Golfers can choose from links to parkland to classic gems that have hosted major championships and LPGA tournaments.

If they're lucky, they might even get to meet a former Miss America.

Granted, that's probably not happening. But on my first day in Atlantic City I had lunch

with Kylene Barker McNeill, who was crowned Miss America in 1979 and regaled me with stories of meeting Bert Parks and John Wayne. She joined us at McCullough's Emerald Golf Links in Egg Harbor Township, named in 2002 by *Golf Magazine* as one of the Top 35 New U.S. Public Courses.

This "tribute course" pays homage to golf in the British Isles with replica holes from Royal Portrush, Carnoustie, Turnberry, Royal Dornoch, Royal County Down, Royal Troon and, of course, the Old Course at St. Andrews.

Measuring 6,535 yards from the tips, it plays much longer, with beefy par-4's and difficult par-3's, pot bunkers, vast natural waste areas, lightning quick, undulating greens and the occasional blind approaches, all laid out in a true links-style atmosphere.



At Emerald Golf Links, you'll think you're in Ireland.



Especially noteworthy is the 464-yard seventh hole, which was conceived yet never built nearly 100 years ago by Alister Mackenzie, architect of Augusta National. It features a three-acre waste bunker, an island fairway and is 159 yards at its widest point.

The following morning we arrived at Shore Gate Golf Club in Ocean View, where I managed to spend a day on the links and at the beach simultaneously. The back tees measure 7,272 yards, and even the forward men's tees check in at 6,391, making this course a serious test. Named by *Golf Digest* as one of the Top 10 public courses in the country, this tree-lined, New England-style layout features deep, massive bunkers, some as much as 40 yards in length. There are 156 bunkers of various widths and designs,



The Bay Club at the Seaview Resort has challenged golfers for more than a century.

including one that stretches the entire right side of the fairway to the green on the 401-yard seventh hole. This is a shot-maker's course that demands precision, with superb par-5's and fast, expansive greens. The ninth hole is unforgettable. At 648 yards from the tips, the fairway doglegs left around a lake, with bunkers guarding the left side of the green.

Stepping back in time

Serious history was on the menu for the third day, with rounds at both Atlantic City Country Club and the Bay Course at the Seaview Resort. The term "birdie" was coined at Atlantic City Country Club, founded in 1897. It has hosted six USGA championships, and the club's professional, Johnny McDermott, became the first American to win the U.S. Open in 1911.



The waste bunkers are endless at Shore Gate Golf Club in Ocean View.

A walk through its clubhouse is like stepping back in time. Photographs of the game's greatest legends line the walls, from Sam Snead to Arnold Palmer. Not long ago, Palmer celebrated his 82nd birthday at the club. The men's locker room is drenched in nostalgia. There are wood lockers with brass name tags of past and present members (including Al Capone), swinging doors leading to a card room, a bar, a fireplace,

stone benches where spike marks are still visible, a high-beamed ceiling and deep leather couches, making this a place to relax and savor.

Of course, it would mean little if the course were not spectacular. A par 70 at 6,175 yards from the members' tees, there are par-4's of 428, 417, 425 and 436. But there are also holes measuring 332, 339 and 333. The 14th tee is among the most memorable spots on the course,

with a dazzling view across a salt marsh to the Atlantic City skyline.

Equally impressive is the nearby Bay Course at Seaview Resort in Galloway. Designed by Donald Ross in 1915 and restored by Bob Cupp in 1998, it hosted the 1942 PGA Championship won by Snead and has been a regular stop on the LPGA Tour. A par 71 that plays only 6,247 from the tips, it is nonetheless intriguing and challenging, with the domed, diabolical greens one would expect from a Ross creation.



Blue Heron Pines

Like Atlantic City CC, this classic gem dazzles with views of the city skyline. It will also bedevil you. The 11th hole plays only 311 yards from the middle tees, but keeping the ball on the sloped green from even 30 yards away requires a surgeon's touch.

The final two courses on the trip were Twisted Dunes in Egg Harbor Township and Blue Heron Pines in Cologne, the latter owned by former NFL quarterback Ron Jaworski. The 14th through 17th holes at Twisted Dunes are memorable, although the 18th is a bland finishing hole. Blue Heron Pines is an outstanding layout, with pristine conditions, wide fairways, smooth, quick greens and creative bunkering.

In the end, we played six wonderful golf courses. If time permitted we could have visited a dozen more of equal quality.

Previously, you might not have considered Atlantic City a golfing destination. Perhaps it's time you did. ©