

# HIDDEN GEMS

**T**here's probably not a golfer alive who hasn't heard of Pebble Beach.

With a century-long history of professional tournaments, seven major championships and a course that is widely beloved, it's part of a pantheon of the best-known, big-name destination golf resorts in America. Other well-known examples include Kohler, Kiawah Island, Pinehurst and PGA National, names that even casual golfers will recognize immediately. Each of these high-profile resorts are worth a trip, but they command dear prices and have scarce availability, with tee-times and hotel rooms that are hard, if not impossible, to land without planning far in advance.

But there is another small group of marquee golf resorts that are

Seven exceptional golf resorts you may not know, each of them ideal for a buddy trip

**BY LARRY OLMSTED**

and with less crowded fairways than those of legend. They may be smaller in name recognition, but not in scope, as this list includes some of the largest golf resorts in the country. Every resort on this list is a true destination with at least three 18-hole courses on the property. Besides an array of exciting golf holes, many also have other unique appeals, from great locations to luxe lodging to amazing amenities. All are worth putting on your list for a buddy trip.

not as well known, places with standout courses and other impressive amenities that remain largely out of the public eye, destinations that are more overlooked by leisure travelers. These are golf's hidden gems, and they are worth seeking out because they offer plenty of great courses, often at lower prices



The picturesque (and well guarded) 18th green at Boyne Mountain's Monument course in Michigan, one of many courses available at Boyne.



rock climbing. There's a brand-new state-of-the-art fitness center and daily guided wine tasting classes in the enormous cellar. Crystal Springs has more than a dozen bars and restaurants, including the fine-dining Latour, which has held the highest possible *Wine Spectator* Grand Award since 2006. It has an enormous wine list, and it claims to be larger than any other you can find at a golf resort.

## Boyne Golf

National golf and ski operator Boyne Resorts is based in its namesake Michigan hometown, and it has three golf resorts arranged around it, all in close proximity to one another. All of them share facilities, so you can stay at any of the hotels or condos and play all three courses interchangeably. Considering the Boyne collection as a single resort (known as Michigan's Magnificent Eleven), it would rank second in the nation only to Pinehurst with 171 holes. Taking a different approach and considering it a group of three separate resorts, Boyne Golf can be considered one of the finest golf destinations in the United States.

With three stunning nines on the shores of Lake Michigan, a body of water so large it might as well be the ocean, 27-hole Bay Harbor is Boyne's flagship course, one considered the seminal design of architect Arthur Hills. Bay Harbor is on *Golf Digest's*

Top 100, and its on-site luxury lodging, the Inn at Bay Harbor, also makes top golf resort lists. The Inn is part of Marriott's luxury boutique Autograph Collection and also has a spa, beach club and Boyne's fanciest eatery, the Vintage Chophouse. Another 18, the Crooked Tree Golf Club, sits up the hill overlooking the lake, and both are played from the Bay Harbor clubhouse.

Boyne Mountain and Highlands are two much larger ski and golf resorts a short drive away. Highlands has four 18-hole courses and a wide variety of lodging including condos, the nicest being the Main Lodge with an English Country hotel theme. The standout is the Donald Ross Memorial Course, the world's very first "tribute" course, replicating famous holes by the great architect, including Pinehurst No. Two and nearly impossible to play privates such as Wannamoisett and Seminole. When it opened in 1989, copies were done with rough estimates, but currently the Ross course is undergoing a hole-by-hole rebuild using satellite imagery and GPS aimed to make each a carbon copy of the real thing. The Robert Trent Jones Sr.-designed Heather is considered the next-best layout, while the other two 18s here are quite good.

Highlands also has the Boyne Golf Academy, with high-tech facilities and immersion camps. It has won multiple awards and has been considered one of America's top golf academies for four decades. The resort just opened the 11th course, a nine-hole short layout called Doon Brae that can be played from multiple tees



## Crystal Springs

This might be the largest golf resort in the United States that most golfers will not recognize by name. Less than an hour's drive from New York City, Crystal Springs is a sprawling resort with six golf courses, four full-size, 18-hole courses along with two nine-hole tracks and a grass putting course. These are anchored by links-style Ballyowen, the Garden State's version of Whistling Straits, designed by Roger Rulewich. It's the highest-ranked public course in New Jersey and the resort's Crystal Springs (by Robert Von Hagge) also gets high praise, as does Wild Turkey, another Rulewich design. There is more than enough standout golf here to go around, and if you're looking to tune up your game this is also the primary Northeastern campus of famed teaching guru David Leadbetter, with a variety of half-day to two-day schools. A new Trackman-powered teaching range with cutting-edge ball flight technology is scheduled to open later this year at the Black Bear clubhouse.

Crystal Springs is very cigar friendly, with large, well-stocked humidors at all three golf clubhouses, each of which also has outdoor terrace space where you can smoke (as well as dine and drink) plus outdoor fire pits and seating areas around the resort. The huge selection skews towards larger sizes and many are packed in tubes, making it easy to toss some in your bag. There is also a standout whiskey program, including multiple private casks.

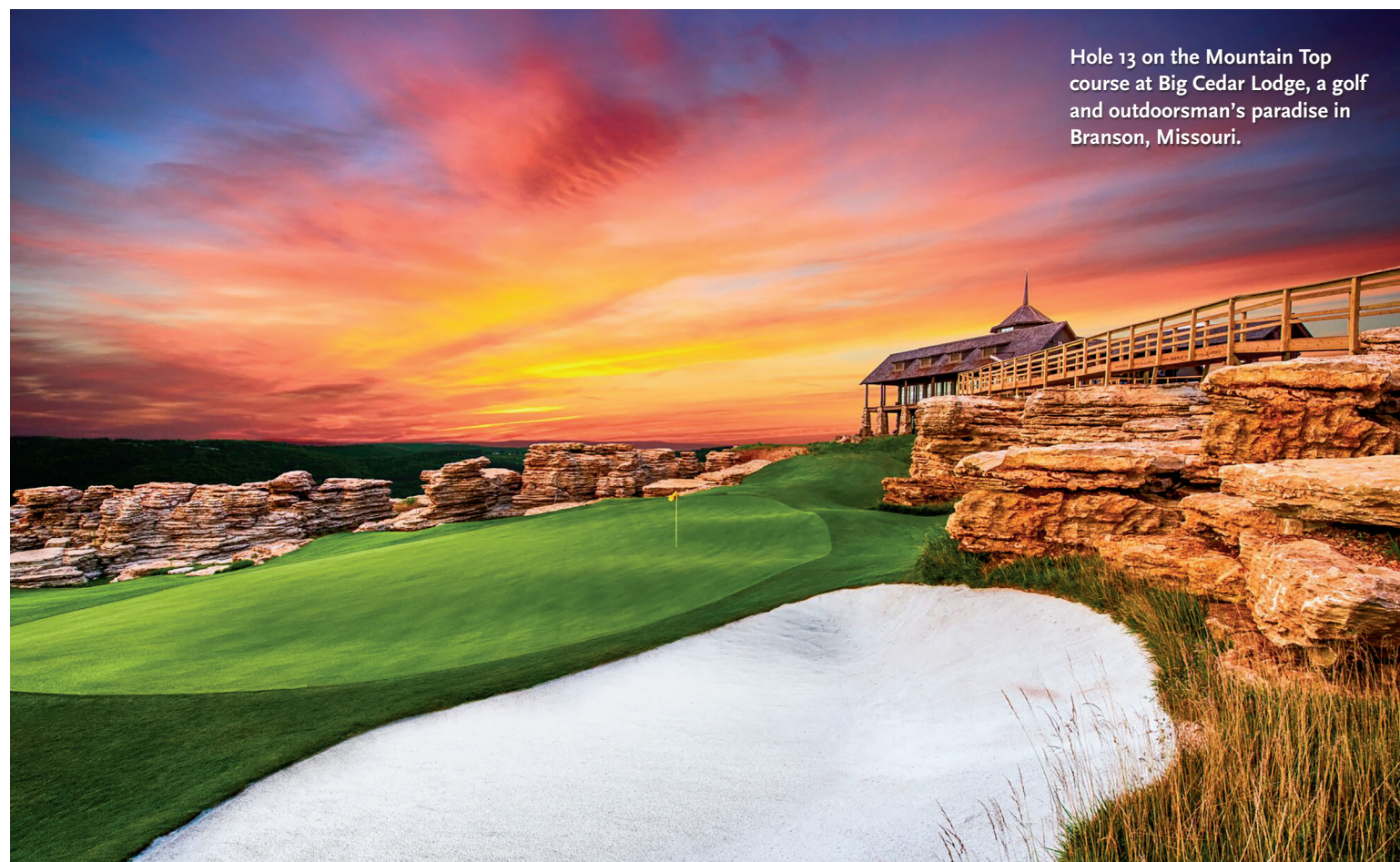
Golf is only part of the picture here. The resort has two full-service hotels, including Grand Cascades Lodge and the Mineral Springs Hotel, both of which have large spas and pool complexes. There is a huge array of outdoor activities to enjoy, including clay shooting, archery, fishing, hiking, axe throwing, stargazing, croquet, crafts classes, fitness classes, pickleball and

Crystal Springs is less than an hour from New York City, and it features six golf courses (top) and a clubhouse stocked with cigars (above).



Boyne Golf's Inn at Bay Harbor, Lakeside Cottages, on the shores of Lake Michigan.

BRIAN WALTERS



Hole 13 on the Mountain Top course at Big Cedar Lodge, a golf and outdoorsman's paradise in Branson, Missouri.

with different challenging lines and lengths, along with a new 1.5-acre grass putting course.

Boyne Mountain has a similarly wide array of lodging, including the full-service Mountain Grand Lodge and Spa. There are two very good 18s, headlined by the Alpine, which runs up and down the ski mountain—mostly down—making golfers feel like heroes. It is also home to a wildly popular Midwestern attraction, scenic pedestrian SkyBridge Michigan, the world's longest timber-towered suspension bridge, accessed via an equally scenic chairlift ride, as well as a world-class fly-fishing operation, ziplines, water-sports, pickleball, horseback riding, tennis, spa and indoor waterpark. The vibrant base village is full of shops and dining.

## Big Cedar Lodge

How can a mega-resort with six golf courses by legendary architects be a hidden gem? In the case of Big Cedar Lodge, timing is everything. Big Cedar is the passion project of Bass Pro Shops founder and chief executive officer Johnny Morris, “The Walt Disney of Retail,” and was originally built as an outdoor-focused, family-friendly lakefront resort to showcase his love of the Ozarks. Big Cedar has arguably the nation's best freshwater fishing facilities and marinas (two, with all new boats and gear from Bass Pro Shops) and became a popular award-winning resort long before there was golf, so it still has that reputation and loyal non-golf customer base.

But once Morris started building courses he could not stop, bringing acclaimed Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw to design

Ozarks National, Tom Fazio to do Buffalo Ridge and Tiger Woods to create the 19-hole Payne's Valley, which concludes with an unforgettable signature island green in a pool at the base of an enormous waterfall. It is Woods' only public 18 in the United States, and it opened to great fanfare, immediately vaulting onto the big golf rankings. Both of the other 18s are also on the list. In addition, Big Cedar has two stunning, full-length par-3 courses designed by Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, and Nicklaus' Top of the Rock is the only par-3 ever used in a PGA Tour sanctioned event. Playing through dramatic rock formations with beautiful views, these are almost certainly the two best “real” par-3 courses in the nation. The newest is a shorter pitch-and-putt style 20-holer, Cliffhangers, set on cliff top terrain overlooking Payne's Valley, so precipitous some tees require safety netting. The coup de grâce here is the first of its kind in golf. The tee of the signature hole is inside a cave, and you hit your shot through a waterfall cascading over the entrance.

Big Cedar Lodge is gorgeous, with free-ranging bison along Buffalo Ridge, frequent deer and wild turkey sightings, and sweeping lake and mountain views. It's a big resort that's packed with amenities, including the cigar-friendly Harry's Cocktail Lounge and Bar, with live jazz, craft cocktails and a view of Table Rock Lake. The resort also offers a hotel, lakefront cabins, luxury golf cottages, a safari-style glamping resort and even its own private aviation airport minutes from the tee. There's a fine spa, a gym and world-class bass fishing. Expansion will bring a sporting clay shooting facility. The Rolling Stones were the opening act for the new outdoor amphitheater.

## Pine Needles

It's hard to live in the shadow of Pinehurst, the largest golf resort in the world outside of China. But five miles away is a hidden gem with three golf courses, all of them highly ranked. In addition, the best of the three layouts just opened to the public last year.

The Mid-Pines Inn was built by the family behind Pinehurst, with the same golf architect, Donald Ross. Next came a second hotel and Ross course, Pine Needles Lodge, directly across the street, which hosted the 2022 U.S. Women's Open. The owners recently acquired the private Southern Pines Country Club, a historic 19-hole Ross course from 1910 that rivals Pinehurst No. Two as the region's “must play.” One of golf's hottest rising star architects, Kyle Franz, did historically accurate restorations of all three courses, and a stunning job on Southern Pines, which immediately jumped onto all the best course lists. Pine Needles also houses one of the game's more renowned academies, with multi-day programs and a dedicated high-tech learning center on 20-acres.

Compared to the other resorts on this list, the lodging, dining and non-golf amenities here are underwhelming, but the quality of the three courses is unmatched.

## Reynolds Lake Oconee

Despite having a Ritz-Carlton hotel and five 18-hole courses on the property, Reynolds Lake Oconee in Georgia is a big-time golf resort that's well known in its immediate region but off the radar of many golfers elsewhere. Located about 85 miles east of Atlanta, each of the courses here is quite good. The Nicklaus Signature design, Great Waters, has 10 holes on the huge lake and is particularly intriguing, but all of the courses (by Tom Fazio, Rees Jones and Bob Cupp) are great fun and take advantage of the gorgeous lake-side setting. (There is also a trio of member-only 18s.)

Reynolds also boasts the Kingdom, arguably the best golf academy in the United States, with a variety of multiday schools overseen by former PGA Tour pro and highly awarded instructor Blake Adams. It's also home to just one of two Taylor Made Tour Experience centers for the ultimate custom club fitting.

Reynolds is a highly-amenitized resort community, with several clubhouses, first-rate cuisine and amazing watersports and fishing. There are sporting clays, archery, falconry, off-road driving, more than 20 miles of nature trails, a huge spa, modern fitness center and seven pools. Throw in the 31 clay, hard and pickleball courts and it is also a top-ranked tennis resort. It offers a wide variety of home and condo rentals, but note that the luxury Ritz-Carlton on property is one of the few in the United States with a club floor and lounge, and the site also has a new hidden speakeasy, but alas it's not cigar friendly. You can buy cigars in the retail shop for smoking on the course or somewhere else outside.



Reynolds Lake Oconee in Georgia has five courses on the property.



Camp Creek Inn, a hidden gem in the Sunshine State.

## Watersound Inn & Camp Creek Inn

The best-kept secret in Florida—the state with the most golf—has stayed off the radar mainly because it is fairly new and of intimate size, but it is easily the most upscale lodging and golf resort in Florida's wildly popular vacation spot, the Panhandle, famed for its gorgeous white sand beaches. The St. Joe Company is a major developer of private club communities around Panama City Beach, and its two boutique hotels give overnight guests “member for the stay” access to three otherwise private courses and all the facilities of the exclusive clubs.



Sunriver in Oregon was the original big hitter in the Pacific Northwest. Pictured here are the teeboxes for the 8th hole.

There are a few other resorts in the Sunshine State with 54 holes or more, but only Streamsong can claim three courses of this overall quality. The Camp Creek course by Tom Fazio is a Top 100, while the Greg Norman-designed Shark's Tooth makes *Golf Digest's* Best in Florida list. The fittingly named third course, The Third, by Davis Love, just opened this spring and is not yet rated, but Love has proven to be a reliably excellent designer, especially in the Southeast. There is also a high-end modern Golf Performance Center at Camp Creek with all the best in high-tech gear including uncommon GASP Labs Force Plates for 3D movement scanning and a multi-brand club fitting studio.

The Camp Creek Inn is the larger, fuller service property with 75 rooms, three restaurants, a resort-style pool with waterslide and lazy river, wellness center and 16 tennis and pickleball courts. It's located right at its namesake golf course. The Watersound Inn is for beach lovers, located at the private Watersound Beach Club, with two on-site restaurants. It's small, with only 11 apartment-style suites, each with full kitchens. Shark's Tooth and the Third have a shared golf clubhouse. Additional facilities here include a 15-station sporting clays course at the Watersound Club, while Camp Creek is about 15 minutes away.

## Sunriver

It's hard for a golf resort other than famed Bandon Dunes to get attention in Oregon, but the original big hitter of the Pacific Northwest was Sunriver, with more than 3,000 acres of property, four golf courses and world-class fly fishing, located about 40 minutes south of Redmond, Oregon, or three-and-a-half hours outside of Portland. The John Fought-designed Crosswater is a gorgeous layout that lives up to its name, with no shortage of aquatic hazards. It was built on a site used to film the original *True Grit* with John Wayne, was a top-rated course when it opened 30 years ago and is still in the Top 100. Sunriver has two other solid 18s by Fought and Robert Trent Jones II, plus a nine-holer designed by Bob Cupp. Both Crosswater and the Jones-designed Woodlands got full renovations within the past two years. There's a full-service golf academy with immersion schools, 18-court pickleball center, biking and hiking trails, an equestrian center, marina and its most unique amenity, a professional astronomy observatory sponsored by NASA with more than a dozen telescopes and guided stargazing sessions. Lodging options include the main hotel and rental homes and cottages, including new luxury homes in the posh Caldara enclave, and there are multiple pools and restaurants across the sprawling resort. ❖