Every summer, Northern Michigan entices golfers with its bountiful array of multi-course golf resorts and world-class layouts. Any list of the best eighteen-holes in the region includes the likes of Crystal Downs, The Kingsley Club, True North, and Belvedere Golf Club—private clubs that are accessible to varying degrees—and Arcadia Bluffs, Bay Harbor, and Forest Dunes. On our most recent foray to the North Woods, we returned for the first time in a decade to Forest Dunes Golf Club.

After Arcadia Bluffs, Tom Weiskopf’s original Forest Dunes layout is the top-rated public-access course in the state. This time, however, the primary lure was The Loop, the brand new Tom Doak design that is fully reversible. The Loop is two courses in one: the Black Course plays clockwise one day and the Red Course proceeds counterclockwise the next. Doak’s creation stands as a brilliant achievement, and it provides a memorable golf experience that will fascinate connoisseurs of golf course architecture and delight those seeking more fine golf in Northern Michigan. Better still, a trip to Forest Dunes is a bargain. The bang for your buck at the club’s remarkable courses is extraordinary.

The Loop may be a testament to Tom Doak’s minimalistic creativity and cerebral dexterity as a course designer, but a unique set of circumstances made the reversible course possible. Located far off the beaten path in the Huron National Forest near the small town of Roscommon, Forest Dunes was originally conceived as a fully private golf and real estate development. It was to be a spare-no-expenses rustic retreat and gated golf community comprising 500 residential lots centered around two of the best courses money could buy.
As the first Forest Dunes eighteen took shape, the original developers gave Tom Weiskopf an enormous budget. Weiskopf delivered a course that cracked top-100 lists immediately upon debuting in 2002. The pristine playing field featured a state-of-the-art irrigation system and intricately detailed bunkering. Members reveled in a gorgeous Adirondack-style clubhouse.

Despite rave reviews, Forest Dunes Golf Club experienced troubles from the start. The anticipated bonanza from real estate sales never materialized. The club went bankrupt, and even after it began welcoming public play, it teetered on the brink of closing. Michigan's Carpenter's Union Pension Fund stepped in to save the club, but the use of expensive union labor continued to drain resources. A number of companies, including Troon Golf, managed Forest Dunes in the intervening years, but none found a formula to put the club on a financially secure path.

The club's fortunes finally turned when Lew Thompson, an Arkansas trucking magnate, entered the picture. Thompson had delved into the golf business with his acquisition of The Bridges, a private club near Telluride, Colorado. On the advice of the former GM of The Bridges, he took a look at Forest Dunes, which was being shopped at a bargain basement price. Thompson got lost trying to find the isolated club (there's still nothing within about 15 minutes), but when he found it, he fell in love. He acquired the 1,300-acre property in 2011.

One of Thompson's first moves was to build the attractive Lake AuSable Lodge, which overlooks the 1st hole of the Forest Dunes Course, mere steps from the clubhouse. The Lodge gave traveling golfers a place to stay and was a crucial first step toward solvency. Even so, with multi-course meccas such as Gaylord and Boyne beckoning farther to the north, all too often traveling golfers continued to treat Forest Dunes as a four-hour pit stop. After finishing their round, they hastily hopped back onto I-75 and headed somewhere else to stay and play.

What the club really needed, Thompson discerned, was a second golf course. The Mike Keiser blueprint, which has been the lifeblood for Bandon Dunes, Cabot Links, and Streamsong, could transform Forest Dunes from a nice place to play into a distinct destination. Plenty of land was available on site. Thompson considered a number of proposals, including one from native Michigan course architect Mike DeVries, who made a splash with his designs at Greywalls and The Kingsley Club in Michigan and, more recently, Cape Wickham Golf Club on King Island, Australia. Thompson ultimately opted to work with Tom Doak, whose company, Renaissance Golf Design, operates out of Traverse City.

Doak's proposal of a reversible course, a concept he had dreamed of executing for more than 20 years, proved highly intriguing to Thompson. Doak called the site "fairly bland," but whereas that may have been a detriment in other situations, it proved ideal for a golfing ground that needed to be receptive to shots played in opposite directions.

Land clearing started in 2014. Very little earth moving was required. The club likes to say that more land was moved on one hole at Forest Dunes than the entire routing of The Loop. By late spring of 2015 the grassing process had already begun. After a member-guest tournament in mid-June, 2016, The Loop began entertaining play from on-site guests with a soft opening a week later. We made our initial visit early last August.

Though the fescue grass was barely grown in last summer, The Loop has played to almost universal acclaim. Doak's greatest feat, besides pulling off the reversible concept, is that players seem to be divided on whether the Red or the Black constitutes the better golf course. Thanks to The Loop, Forest Dunes now truly has “three” outstanding eighteens.

Forest Dunes no longer requires an overnight stay to secure a tee time on The Loop as it did last year, but since players take it on in one direction one day and the other direction the next, there's plenty of incentive to put down on-site for the night. (Note that those who do not stay at Forest Dunes may only book tee times a week in advance.) The club not only offers the Lake AuSable Lodge, which features 14 hotel-style rooms and two two-bedroom suites with full kitchens, but also a number of two- and four-
bedroom villas and cottages. You won’t find anything nearly as inviting anywhere nearby.

The Northern Michigan golf season, which commenced this year in early April, usually runs through the end of October. You are taking a chance with the weather if you visit before mid-May or in October. Fall brings spectacular colors, but we love summertime. Even if it gets hot during the day, the nights won’t be sweltering. Best of all, you can play well into the night. In late June there’s enough light to play until 10 p.m.

Forest Dunes is about 15 minutes from I-75. The drive from Detroit takes between three and 3.5 hours. The closest commercial airports are Traverse City’s Cherry Capital Airport (TVC), about 90 minutes away, and Saginaw’s MBS International Airport (MBS), a 100-mile drive. If you have access to a private plane, Roscommon County-Blodgett Memorial Airport (HTL) is 25 miles from Forest Dunes.

The Loop (Rating: A-) is as novel a concept as you will find in golf course architecture. It consists of 18 greens and 18 pins, and yet it is fully reversible and plays quite naturally as two distinct golf courses. From either direction, you might never suspect that you’ve traversed the same ground in the opposite direction the previous day. If this sounds like golf’s version of The Riddle of the Sphinx, take heart that neither eighteen will eat you alive—both courses are very playable.

“The Loop” is aptly named, because the routing proceeds clockwise (Black Course) and counterclockwise (Red Course). Each is a spacious, walking-only par-70 layout with five par threes, 10 par fours, and three par fives. The sand-based terrain produces a number of natural dips and rises, while scrub brush and pine trees lurk at the boundaries. Gentle contours prevail on ground that lacks huge elevation changes, captivating features, or water hazards. Even the greens are tamer than you would expect from Doak, a requirement of the two-way play that each putting surface must accommodate. Not surprisingly, criticism of The Loop tends to come from those who are averse to minimalism and find the layouts uneventful.

For us, however, the fun began the moment we walked out from the clubhouse to the free-form 1st tee of the Red Course. We gazed out at a green but immediately perceived that the fairway landing area is blind. Tee shots play to a hidden valley, setting up an uphill approach to a wide green blanketed front-right by an enormous yawning bunker. So began our march on this open and exposed (the club commands one of the Northern Michigan’s windier inland locales) routing.

Doak’s fairways are generous—some are more than 50 yards wide—and there’s no rough to speak of, either. Though it may be hard to miss the groomed fescue grass on the fly, the firm turf yields extraordinary run-out, often leading errantly struck shots to scurry into the scrub vegetation at the margins. You’ll score much better if you utilize the ground game. Plan on landing your approach shots well short of the putting surfaces. Note that a good bit of sand also dots the playing field. Not surprisingly, Doak’s bunkers feature naturalistic borders. Most of the sand on The Loop is considered a “natural area” in which you may ground your club. Only traditional bunkers have rakes, and those are few and far between.

The final four holes of the Red Course present a rigorous examination. Fifteen is a par four with a green that runs away to the left; the best chance to hold the putting surface is from the left, but that’s where Doak placed a fairway bunker. On 16, a long, wide par four, beware of the bunker that lies hidden in the middle of the fairway. The round concludes with a tough par three and a long, steeply uphill par four. Remarkably, 18 is the only hole on the Red where players hit an approach shot that doesn’t yield a view of the green.

The Black Course starts to the left of the 18th green on both courses. Most players find the par-four opener too long to reach in regulation; Doak advises that you think of it as a short par five. The first of the five predominantly long par threes comes next. The Black also features a couple of excellent short
The Loop may lack high drama, but it is fun to play and a joy to walk par fours on the front nine, including the 4th, Doak’s favorite test among all 36 of The Loop. Unless your tee shot reaches the crest of the fairway on the 4th, you won’t be able to see the green that sits down in a dell. Since the short par-four 7th plays between 183 and 308 yards, you may be tempted to go for the green on your tee shot, but be advised that you must carry a sinister bunker in the middle of the fairway. The green is also tough to hold unless you approach from the center.

While The Loop may lack drama, the Red and Black courses offer plenty of subtle intrigue. You won’t feel like you are simply playing back the opposite way when you play your second round. Despite the generally clockwise and counterclockwise direction of the routings, approach angles vary considerably. Doak also has been able to create some memorable green complexes. This is especially true of the par threes.

Ideally, the club would have waited until this year to open, as last summer the grass was quite thin and the greens were exceptionally firm. The good news is the grass is now about 85 percent grown-in. We have been told you can barely see down to the soil base. The tall fescue grass at press time was just shy of five inches and growing rapidly. It will grow to well past two feet high, but since it is wispy, you should still be able to find your ball and play a shot.

Tee times are spaced 11 minutes apart with a recommended pace of play of 4.5 hours. Our rounds clocked in at that pace or a bit faster. The Loop receives less play than the original Forest Dunes layout because of its walking-only policy. You are welcome to carry your own bag or rent a push cart. Caddies and forecaddies are also available and highly recommended, especially if you are playing The Loop for the first time. The club’s caddie program includes college-age kids as well as veteran caddies who spend part of their year at places such as TPC Sawgrass, Whistling Straits, and Sea Island.

The Loop’s thorough two-in-one course guide fittingly begins with the Red Course from one cover and the Black Course from the other. When you open up the book you see a diagram across the two pages depicting the corresponding Red and Black tests (for instance, Red 1 & Black 18, Red 2 & Black 17, etc.). The book costs $6 in the golf shop but you will benefit immensely not only from the hole diagrams but also from Doak’s strategic playing tips and notes on the most formidable and intriguing holes on each routing. It is also a nice souvenir of this creative course that offers a truly memorable golf experience.

**Forest Dunes Golf Course (Rating: A-),** one of Tom Weiskopf’s favorite and finest designs, is a much different animal than The Loop. This beautiful, exquisitely groomed parkland-style layout extends over about 500 acres. This, too, is an aptly named layout, for the front nine winds through corridors lined by majestic hardwood and pine trees, while the back nine rambles amidst more open areas with expansive sandy native areas bordering the fairways and greens. With five sets of tee markers, Forest Dunes can be played as short as 3,087 yards and as long as 7,116 yards.

Forest Dunes is great fun to play. The routing features impressive variety, and Weiskopf constantly forces you to think your way around with a collage of elegant doglegs, split fairways, imposing bunkering, patches of tall grass, water that inhibits the swing on six holes, and risk/reward angles. Unlike so many other North Woods courses, the trees and undergrowth at Forest Dunes are typically neither dense nor thick. You’ll find spaces between the trees and perhaps even a woodland floor that permits a recovery shot, but if you find the ferns your luck has likely run out.

While the front nine offers tranquility and some seclusion amidst the trees, expansive waste bunkers and transition areas lend the holes on the back nine a unique look and a contrasting playing style. Proper club selection will be vital to your success on this more rugged and windswept portion of the course. One of the many outstanding holes is the drivable short par-four 17th. Whether you go for the green or lay up, make sure you avoid the deep round bunker 90 yards short of the entry to the putting surface.
Weiskopf’s greens are a highlight of the layout. They are fast and smooth, and they roll true. The club often has them running at 11 on the Stimpmeter, and they can roll even faster. Several feature pronounced undulations. They certainly rank among the best putting surfaces in the Midwest.

After the 18th hole, Forest Dunes gives you a final treat: a par-three "bye" hole. This tricky one-shooter plays over a marshy pond and is perfect for settling your last bets of the day.

Practice facilities at Forest Dunes Golf Club include a driving range, chipping green, and putting green.

Editor's Note: Forest Dunes may not be done building golf courses yet. We've heard talk that eventually another full eighteen or a par-three course with as many as 12 holes could join the existing courses.

The resort's Lake AuSable Lodge (Rating: B+) is very close to the clubhouse and mere steps from the first tees of the golf courses. Customized stay-and-play packages are available. The fourteen standard hotel-style rooms in the Lodge feature two queen beds or, less frequently, one king. While we wish the chambers came with a mini-refrigerator and were a little larger, they are clean, attractive, and comfortable. The 1,600-square foot two-bedroom suites are a cut above. They command the second floor and include a common area, fully equipped kitchen, two full baths, and private balcony overlooking the 1st tee boxes of Forest Dunes. Note that Wi-Fi access is free at Forest Dunes, but cell phone reception can be spotty with some carriers.

The club also has several cottages and villas on offer. Spread throughout the property, these privately owned residences range from two to four bedrooms and sleep four to eight guests.

Forest Dunes (Rating: C) has a single dining venue. The clubhouse bar and dining room are nice, airy spaces with exposed beams and rich wood accents. Additional tables are available out on the patio that runs alongside the large and rather cathedral-like main dining room. We were frustrated by how slow the service was or, perhaps more to the point, how long it took for our food to arrive. On one occasion we were almost the only ones in the dining room. The food won’t win any GOLF ODYSSEY awards, but it hits the spot. At dinner, we liked the walleye and the BBQ pork short ribs. Your best bet at lunch is the house burger. At breakfast, a buffet will only be on offer when the resort is close to capacity. Otherwise, opt for the breakfast burrito (with sausage) or the cinnamon French toast.

Forest Dunes is strictly a golf retreat. You won't find a pool or a fitness center on site, although there is a small lake with a bit of a sandy beach. The surrounding Huron National Forest is a haven for outdoor pursuits, including hiking and biking. The area is also a favorite of ATV adrenaline junkies. Just two miles south of Forest Dunes, the Au Sable River boasts some of the Midwest's best fly-fishing.

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The Omni Mount Washington Resort

Splendor in the White Mountains

Perched on a knoll above the Ammonoosuc River and surrounded by a meadow ringed by some of the tallest mountains in the East, the grand Omni Mount Washington Resort hotel cuts an impressive figure. This historic Spanish Renaissance Revival palace is one of our favorite retreats in the Northeast. Though the resort, located in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, enjoys greater popularity as a winter ski haven, from May through October it offers 27 holes of golf highlighted by a marvelously restored Donald Ross eighteen.

Make no mistake, the hotel is an attraction in its own right that lends a special aura to a golf getaway. In the late 1890s, Joseph Stickney, a coal and railroad baron, conceived a sumptuous hotel unlike any other in the Northeast. The Mount Washington Hotel would be the most lavish of some 20 summer hotels in the White Mountains, catering to fashionable guests seeking respite from the summer heat. Though it has a granite foundation and a steel infrastructure, the hotel is considered the largest wooden structure in New England. Thomas Edison oversaw the electrical installations and 250 Italian artisans added intricate detail and plasterwork. Much of their craftsmanship remains on display. The flooring is original from 1902, as are the Tiffany stained glass windows. The hotel also featured a heated indoor pool. When the doors opened in June of 1902 and other posh hotels charged $5 per night, the nightly rate of the Mount Washington was an unheard-of $20. In its heyday, 50 trainloads of well-heeled guests arrived each day at this showplace retreat.

Nowadays, the Omni Mount Washington is the region’s only remaining full-service resort. The hotel, which exudes the charms of a bygone era, has enjoyed a renaissance over the last decade thanks to the addition of a lavish spa and conference center, thorough renovations of the restaurants and guestrooms, and Brian Silva’s terrific transformation of the 1915-vintage Donald Ross golf course. The vast 3,000-acre property, which has been managed by Omni Hotels & Resorts since 2009 and was acquired in full by the chain in late 2015, is now one of the most satisfying places to stay and play in New England.

Though Bretton Woods is delightful in-season, the season is short. This year, play commenced on the Mount Washington Course on May 6th and, weather permitting, it will stay open until the end of October. The resort offers a full array of activities in addition to golf, but many, including tennis, don’t get into full swing until mid-June. By mid-September, the hotel turns into a base camp for leaf peepers. If you’re golfing late in the season, knock on wood that there won’t be any frost or snow.

Our only lament is that the resort is not easy to reach. Most guests drive to the White Mountains. From New York City, the 350-mile journey takes roughly six hours. The closest commercial airports are Portland International Jetport (PWM) in Maine and Manchester-Boston Regional Airport (MHT), both of which are two hours away. Burlington International Airport (BTV) in Vermont is about a 2.5-hour drive, and Boston-Logan International Airport (BOS) is 160 miles from the hotel. If you fly privately, Mount Washington Regional Airport (HIE) is 15 miles from Bretton Woods.

The Mount Washington Course (Rating: B+) is one of the jewels of New England golf. That’s a sentence we wouldn’t have dared print a decade ago, before Brian Silva took his turn at restoring and updating a Donald Ross layout that had grown tired and bland. Back then, the greens were small and flat, the bunkers were shallow and poorly groomed, and the course didn’t drain well. This was a shame, because the setting between the storied hotel and the Presidential Range has always been nothing short of awe-inspiring.

In 2007 and 2008, Silva worked meticulously from Ross’s 1915 course drawings and notes. He saw that numerous bunkers had either been eliminated or were never built and that the greens had...
lost their original character. Even the scenic splendor one experienced while playing had waned, as trees blocked out the mountains and hotel.

We hadn't been to Bretton Woods since Silva's restoration, but we are happy to report that when we visited last September the course was a joy to play. The par-72 layout extends to 7,004 yards, though most players take it on at 6,400 or 5,668 yards. It features a new start because the original opening hole was lost when the resort's spa and conference center were built. The tee shot on the par-four 1st, which proceeds over the river and out toward the Presidential Range, sets the tone for the entire round. Inspired by Ross's spirit and blueprints, Silva also routed holes 2, 3, 4, and 5 on new ground. On the 4th hole, he inserted a Principal's Nose bunker that Ross had diagrammed but never built.

The rest of the routing closely follows Ross's original plans. The entire layout sits beautifully on the land. Though one would expect the Mount Washington Course to be an alpine track, it rambles over a wide valley and never veers onto steep ground. Most of the members walk. While the front nine occupies flat meadowland, the back nine dives into somewhat more rugged and hilly terrain. Natural folds, swales, and ripples lend pleasing character to holes that play through generous corridors. Thanks to the removal of non-native trees and vegetation, the sight lines showcase the stunning surroundings. Postcard mountain vistas stand out on the 1st, 6th, and 9th holes, while the 5th and 11th present gorgeous views of the hotel.

Mount Washington's fairway bunkers now must be reckoned with. They cut into upslopes in the land and sit perpendicular to the pathway of the holes. Some appear to be deceptively close to the putting surfaces, though in actuality they lurk 30 to 40 yards out. As Ross outlined, Mount Washington's most formidable sand traps are four- to five-feet deep. Surrounded by tall grass borders, they are hazards to be avoided at all costs. If your ball rolls up to the base of a bunker's front wall, you likely must play out diagonally.

The green complexes are also intriguing. Kick slopes aid or repel shots depending on the angle of approach. Many of the greens are quite large and feature pronounced undulations, internal and external contouring, and side falloffs. The putting surface on the 4th hole features four different levels. Last fall, the greens rolled at 10 to 10.5 on the Stimpmeter.

In stark contrast to reports we'd heard a few years back from GOLF ODYSSEY subscribers, we found course conditions to be exquisite. One of our playing partners, a course superintendent from Conway, New Hampshire, told us Mount Washington is always in fine condition and drains very well. The truth is, turf conditions hinge largely on the severity of the previous winter. This year, only the 12th green was slow to bounce back. With smooth greens, pristine fairways, lush rough, and clear blue skies showcasing the stunning surroundings, we couldn't ask for anything more from our round on the Mount Washington Course.

The nine-hole Mount Pleasant Course (Rating: B) offers a worthy game and is maintained just like the Ross course. Golf was first played on this site below the hotel and beside the Ammonoosuc River in 1895. In 1989, Geoffrey Cornish and Brian Silva updated the layout, considered by many to be the toughest of the resort's three nines. While Mount Pleasant starts off with a downhill tee shot to a double-wide fairway, the playing corridors on this nine-holer are narrower than those of the Mount Washington Course. Note that if you are out with novice players, they may welcome the chance to aim toward the alternative eight-inch cups.

The Omni Mount Washington Resort (Rating: A) is one of America's historic Grand Dame hotels. From the wrap-around verandas to the “Cave,” a Prohibition-era speakeasy, an air of history and enchantment envelops every nook and cranny. Vintage photographs line the hallways and alcoves. The Gold Room commemorates the Bretton Woods Conference held here in 1944 when Allied leaders established the World Bank. You will enjoy your visit more if you explore each floor and soak in the historic aura. Note also that hotel tours are on offer daily at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.
The guestrooms occupy the four floors above the glorious lobby level. Rooms vary considerably in size; some are sumptuous, others have tiny bathrooms. While you feel like you are stepping back in time, the chambers, which feature tall ceilings and nice bedding, are more quaint than historically accurate. The choicest suites, situated in the hotel's three towers, boast separate bedroom and living spaces. All rooms have large flat-screen televisions with an array of channels to satisfy any sports junkie. Omni Select members receive complimentary turndown service. Wi-Fi access, valet parking, resort shuttles, hotel tours, use of the fitness center, and the like are included in the $29 nightly resort fee.

Many of the staff members are international interns. We received excellent service from the concierge, who called the Cog Railway for us and conveyed that we were racing to catch the last train of the day.

Editor's Note: The Omni features additional resort lodging such as the Bretton Arms, a New England B&B-style inn, the budget-oriented Lodge at Bretton Woods, and two- to five-bedroom townhomes.

The Omni Mount Washington (Dining Rating: B+) offers an appealing range of dining options. The Main Dining Room is a grand open space with impressive chandeliers, glorious mountain views, and light musical entertainment. Request a table next to the picture windows. Though the dress code has been relaxed, many guests still dress up for dinner. The hit at our table was the artfully presented coffee-crusted ribeye with maple braised Brussels sprouts, fingerling potato ragout, and Sherry garlic mushroom au jus.

Stickney's Restaurant, a more casual option located downstairs, features a pub-like bar near the entrance and a larger dining room as you fully enter the restaurant. Though Stickney's is noted for steaks, we were utterly happy with the rack of lamb.

We walked through the parking lot and woods to get to the Bretton Arms Dining Room. A warm, intimate ambience envelops the dining room. The restaurant has a very nice wine list, including a slew of varietals by the glass. Traditional favorites on the menu include Chilean sea bass, duck breast, and venison loin. At Fabyan's Restaurant, a pub-style eatery located a mile off-site in a converted train depot, we had the tasty "Burger of the Day" for lunch. The resort shuttle will take you there if you prefer not to drive.

Bretton Woods is a great recreation area. The resort's well-run tennis club features Har-Tru courts and plenty of clinics and playing opportunities. Additional summer activities include horseback riding, carriage rides, fly-fishing and mountain biking. You can also soar amidst the tree canopy on the longest zip line in New Hampshire. The family-oriented hotel offers a kids program in summer for ages 4-12.

Mount Washington (6,288 ft.) is the highest peak in the Northeastern US. On a clear day at the summit you can see parts of four states and the Canadian province of Quebec, but hold onto your hat. Winds once reached 231 mph, a world record. The day we visited, it was steady at 43 mph with 57 mph gusts.

Given the decades-long ubiquity of the "This Car Climbed Mt. Washington" bumper sticker, it goes without saying you can drive to the summit, but the coolest way to get there is via the historic Cog Railway. The base station is 15 minutes from the hotel. Steam locomotives have been making the three-mile mountain climbing journey since 1869. Round trips take three hours: one hour travel each way and one hour at the summit. At its steepest point, the railway grade is 37 degrees, which means the difference between the heads of people at the front and back of the coach is a full 13 feet.

After going up the mountain, nothing beats a spa treatment. The resort's showplace spa features nature-inspired, White Mountain-themed treatments.

Omni Mount Washington Resort
brettonwoods.com; 603-278-1000 or 603-278-4653 (golf)
200 rooms and suites from $199 to $1,300.
Green fee: Mount Washington, $52 to $105. Mount Pleasant, $30 to $59.
Aerification: early May; mid-September.
North Carolina’s Outer Banks
First in Flight, Less Heralded in Golf

North Carolina’s Outer Banks is one of the most popular family beach getaways on the Atlantic Seaboard. This rather remote, ribbon-like string of sandy barrier islands along the northern part of the state’s coastline is also immortalized as the spot where Orville and Wilbur Wright made aviation history with their first successful self-propelled motorized flight. Back in 1903, the Wright Brothers recognized that the region’s strong buffeting winds, open spaces, and ubiquitous sand dunes were ideally suited for experiments in flight. Those same features make the Outer Banks a propitious place for golf as well. When Art Wall built Sea Scape Golf Course in 1968, hope spread that the region would become an “American Scotland” links haven. Though the game never reached the prolific, all-consuming heights it attained farther south on the Grand Strand that extends to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, the Outer Banks offers a number of courses that will satisfy your holiday golf fix.

This past March, we got a jump on the season by playing the region’s four top eighteens ahead of the peak-season crowds. The star is The Currituck Club, a championship-caliber Rees Jones design in Corolla. Some 30 miles to the south, we found sporty Nags Head Golf Links a delight. When the wind is up, this short links will give you all you can handle. The remaining two eighteens on our itinerary are located back on the mainland. Tough and varied Kilmarlic Golf Club is just five miles from the bridge that leads to the Outer Banks’ island communities. In Grandy, some 10 miles still farther north, The Carolina Club is ideally situated for a warmup or getaway round.

Since only two bridges provide access to the Outer Banks, and since Highway 12, the barrier islands’ main thoroughfare, extends for 95 often slow-going miles, choose your base in the region wisely. All of the beach towns from Corolla to the north and Hatteras to the south exude different vibes. We prefer the quieter and refined enclaves to the north where you are spared the tourist kitsch, cheap motels, and greater congestion that can be overwhelming farther to the south at Nags Head. Our favorite town in the region, Duck, retains a local feel with its merchant shops and array of very good restaurants. It is also relatively close to three of the four courses on our itinerary.

Most visitors to the Outer Banks rent beach homes, typically on a weekly basis. Many of the homes around Duck are quite grand. We stayed at the Sanderling Resort, the only luxury full-service retreat in the region. The recently renovated oceanfront property, which boasts a pampering spa, indoor and outdoor pools, and two on-site restaurants, is four miles north of Duck and six miles south of the Currituck Club. Though the Outer Banks region is renowned in aviation history, it’s not easy to get to if you are flying. The closest commercial airport, Norfolk International Airport (ORF), is 90 miles (normally a two-hour drive) from the Sanderling Resort. Even private flyers find access inconvenient. Currituck County Regional Airport (ONX) is 42 miles from the Sanderling, and Dare County Regional Airport (MQI) is 33 miles away.

Editor’s Note: While throngs of vacationers descend on the Outer Banks during the hot summer months, spring and fall are much less crowded and often idyllic. September and October are our favorite months, as the crowds dissipate, temperatures moderate, the winds usually calm down, and the ocean waters remain warm. Alas, fall is also the heart of hurricane season. When storm fronts surge, these islands are defenseless targets.

The ClubCorp-managed Currituck Club (Rating: B+) is a 1996 Rees Jones design that extends over the expansive site of a former hunt club. The diverse playing field alternates between sand dunes, wetlands, maritime forests, and the sound-side shoreline.
Though the course is set up for resort play (carts come with GPS and are mandatory), you'll want to bring an extra sleeve of balls. In addition to confronting frequent forced carries, players must thread their tee shots and approaches between lakes, wetlands, large bunkers, and OB borders. The course bares its teeth when the wind whips. The prevailing southwesterly winds can be extremely tough, especially on the par-four 4th, one of the sternest driving holes, where a lake lurks to the right and OB inhibits the swing on the left. Once you get to the green on this 6,885-yard layout, you may feel like you can score. Putts roll true on the gently undulating bentgrass greens.

On busy days in season, some 250 names populate the club’s tee sheets. Starters send groups out off of both nines every eight minutes all throughout the morning. This can make for slow-going rounds, but at least the scenery is attractive if you’re forced to wait between shots. The club recently cut back vegetation to open up sea views on the holes that play along Currituck Sound. Note that Sanderling Resort guests receive a $20 discount on their green fee.

**Nags Head Golf Links (Rating: B)**, another ClubCorp facility, winds through a subdivision on Roanoke Sound about 25 miles down Highway 12 from the Sanderling. Though packed tee sheets and holiday players of every ilk slow the pace of play, this par-71 links (4,415 to 6,126 yards from four sets of tee markers) delivers the most stunning seaside golf in the region. Both nines conclude with holes along the Sound. Even though ocean breezes, which tend to be stronger here than up north at Currituck, make the course seem surprisingly long, be prepared to hit hybrids and mid-irons off the tee; the only true “driver” hole is the signature par-five 18th. Since there are a number of blind and semi-blind shots, a yardage guide ($5) can help immensely. Practice facilities include a chipping and putting green and a driving range with reduced flight golf balls. The clubhouse restaurant and bar is a popular lunch spot, but it closes at 5 p.m.

Back on the mainland, **Kilmarlic Golf Club (Rating: B)** is the region’s toughest test. Carved through thick woodlands on the available land of a former Currituck swamp, Kilmarlic’s tight fairways are lined not only by trees, but also by wetlands and tall, unruly grass. The rousing finishing stretch extends alongside a vast marsh but also features the back nine’s three most challenging holes. Though the Tournament tee markers measure just 6,585 yards, they boast a formidable 144 slope rating. Those who play from the Gold markers, the third of five tee options, confront a 6,011-yard test with a 134 slope rating.

Kilmarlic usually exacts a heavy toll on those playing it for the first time. Water abounds, and the back tee markers tuck well back into chutes. Though the fairways are not overly narrow, they play tighter than they look because tall grass and marsh protrude into the manicured areas and unfriendly contouring propels balls away from the groomed turf. Occasionally, the trouble is not discernible, even if you study the course guide. Be advised that rounds can bog down when groups repeatedly spend time looking for balls.

We like Kilmarlic’s scenery and variety (especially the island green par-three 11th and two short par fours), but it’s a disjointed layout. Long drives from greens to tees twist and turn so much you can easily get lost unless you heed the signs. If you make it back to the clubhouse successfully, the dining room, which looks out on the finishing hole, has an extensive menu and very good daily specials. **The Carolina Club (Rating: B-)** weaves through a residential neighborhood in the town of Grandy. This player-friendly routing rambles over wide and open terrain. Though ponds and wetlands dot the golf grounds, the hazards take a wider berth here than at Kilmarlic and the Currituck Club. The club’s signature test is the island-green par-three 7th, but the water-bound par fives that conclude each nine are just as exciting. Practice facilities include a 180-yard driving range and chipping and putting greens. The modest clubhouse has a golf shop and a restaurant and bar, though we weren’t inclined to linger.

The **Sanderling Resort (Rating: A)** is a very comfortable, unpretentious five-acre luxury beach retreat with a wide array of amenities and a friendly staff. Recent renovations have rejuvenated the property. The public spaces are now brighter and more open, the beds and furnishings in the guest rooms have been upgraded, and the entire resort seems more harmoniously attuned to the beach and sea. We prefer to stay in the Beach House, the hub of the resort, where you will find the guest registration counter, a lobby lounge with morning coffee, and an outdoor fire pit. Note that as part of the $30 nightly resort fee, guests are not expected to tip the bell or housekeeping staff.

In-season, the resort imposes a two-night minimum stay requirement during the week and three-night minimum on weekends. Don't give up, however, if you seek a shorter stay. The resort will try to accommodate you based on availability.
The Sanderling also features appealing lodging for larger families or groups in three-, four- and six-bedroom vacation homes. These residences will be renovated in the next phase of the resort’s improvement project.

The Sanderling Resort (Dining Rating: B+) features two restaurants. The Lifesaving Station, which offers casual dining for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, reopened this spring (after our visit) following a major renovation. Across the street, Kimball’s Kitchen is a fine dining venue overlooking Currituck Sound. You won’t regret the New York Strip or the Rack of Lamb.

Rest assured you will eat well if you sample the restaurants of Duck. Our favorite, The Blue Point, serves outstanding Southern coastal cuisine in its always busy, upscale dining room on Currituck Sound. Hits at our table included the pan-fried local jumbo lump crab cakes and the spice-rubbed grilled bone-in pork chop. Be advised that at dinner you will need a reservation, even for a seat at the bar.

Cravings Steaks & Seafood is one of Duck’s favorite dives. Takeout options include Seafood Pots To-Go—mélages of local shrimp, clams, oysters, crabs, smoked sausage, potatoes, corn and sauce that come with cooking directions. Cravings is also a full-service restaurant and bar—the scallops are especially good—and it offers outdoor entertainment and party games.

The Roadside Bar & Grill occupies the oldest house in Duck. Each night, the best item at this surf-and-turf restaurant is usually the fresh fish of the day special. You can dine inside or out on the patio. The Roadside’s backyard bar features live music a couple of nights a week.

The Outer Banks region is a haven for all sorts of pursuits involving wind, sand, and sea. Beach bellmen at the Sanderling Resort attend to guests’ needs. There’s no shortage of facilities and amenities. One of the resort’s pool options is an adult’s only Tranquility Pool and whirlpool spa. The resort’s Activities Kiosk rents watersports equipment.

The beaches from Corolla northward up to the Virginia state line are home to wild Spanish mustangs. While you may see these horses on your beach strolls, tour companies offer safari excursions in 4x4 vehicles. See the Sanderling concierge for details.

The region’s star historic attraction is the Wright Brothers National Memorial. Though the Visitor Center is closed for renovations until 2018, you can still tour the grounds. Markers show the takeoff and landing spots of Orville and Wilbur’s first self-propelled flights.

The Currituck Club
thecurrituckgolfclub.com; 888-453-9400 or 252-453-9400
Green fee: $60 to $165.
Aerification: early March; late May; early September.

Nags Head Golf Links
nagsheadgolflinks.com; 800-851-9404 or 252-441-8073
Green fee: $59 to $129.
Aerification: early June and possibly in the fall.

Kilmarlic Golf Club
kilmarlic.com; 252-491-4220
Green fee: $50 to $115.
Aerification: early April; late September.

The Carolina Club
thecarolinaclub.com; 252-453-3588
Green fee: $36 to $89.
Aerification: mid-November.

Sanderling Resort
sanderling-resort.com; 855-412-7866
88 rooms and suites and a few vacation beach houses from $139 to $2,000.

A Guide to Our Ratings
As a rule of thumb, establishments in the “A” range are among the world’s finest and are not to be missed. Those in the “B” range still offer merit, but fall short of “must-go” status. Lower ratings may not meet the standards of our discerning readers.
Shepherd’s Rock Debuts at Nemacolin Woodlands

While the golf world eagerly awaits the debut of Gil Hanse’s Streamsong Black in September, traveling golfers should note a couple of exciting openings this month. On July 1, Nemacolin Woodlands Resort in southwest Pennsylvania cuts the ribbon on Shepherd’s Rock, a second championship-caliber Pete Dye eighteen to go along with Mystic Rock, which hosted the PGA Tour’s now-defunct 84 Lumber Classic from 2003 to 2006. The expansive new course rambles over rolling and at times rugged terrain previously occupied by the resort-style Links Course and undeveloped land that had been used for Jeep trails.

We don’t know how long Dye intends to keep working (he’s 91), but this will be among his last projects. He has promised a varied layout—a couple of the fairways are 85 to 100 yards wide—on a routing that features a spread out front nine and a more compact back nine. Shepherd’s Rock mimics the look of Mystic Rock and showcases all the architectural features you would expect in a Pete Dye design, including railroad tie bunkers and numerous pot bunkers. With six sets of tee boxes, Nemacolin is hoping Shepherd’s Rock will be playable and fun for all skill levels. Fourteen of the holes feature vistas of the Laurel Highlands. Note that a caddie is mandatory until twilight play (after 2 p.m.) kicks in.

The Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch Opens With Reversible Golf

Amazingly, The Loop isn’t the only reversible course to officially debut in 2017. On July 5, The Retreat at Silvies Valley Ranch, a brand new luxury resort in Eastern Oregon, opens its doors to its first guests and unveils its Dan Hixson-designed reversible course. Like The Loop, it’s a links-style routing that will play clockwise one day and counterclockwise the next. That’s where the similarity ends, however. Owner Scott Campbell told us the golf grounds sit on a small portion of his 140,000-acre cattle ranch. Because Campbell and Hixson, the designer of Bandon Crossings, did not want to compromise the quality of the golf holes in any way, Silvies Ranch is not as “pure” a reversible layout as The Loop. Note that though the two routings, known as the Hankins and Craddock courses, are very walkable, carts are available. The Chief Egan Course, a “conventional” nine-hole par-27 layout designed by Hixson, is also available.

Perched at 5,400 feet above sea level, Silvies Valley Ranch spreads out over a beautiful landscape of mountain meadows, pine forest, and Eastern Oregon uplands. The upscale resort’s accommodations currently consist of eight nicely appointed two-bedroom log cabins and three ranch houses with six hotel-style bedrooms in each. Three chefs are on staff, with a menu featuring top quality beef, chevon (goat), elk, and trout. Sport shooting, opportunities to help herd goats, and carriage rides with Clydesdales will also be on offer. A spa is being readied for 2018 and still more golf in the form of an “extreme course” and a putting course will come on board next year or shortly thereafter.

Silvies Valley Ranch is about halfway between Bend, Oregon and Boise, Idaho on Highway 395. If you fly privately, the Ranch has its own airport facility. The closest commercial airports are Redmond Municipal Airport (RDM), 2.5 hours away, and Boise Airport (BOI), nearly 3.5 hours away. Golf season runs through mid-October.