Ireland’s Southwest
Golf Along the Wild Atlantic Way

With its rolling green hills and ever-changing seas, postcard villages and cozy country pubs, the province of Munster—and specifically the counties of Clare, Kerry, and Cork—is the Ireland that most accurately mirrors the mental picture of those who have never visited the Emerald Isle. The southwest is the country’s pre-eminent golf destination and, other than the capital of Dublin, its most popular overall tourist destination. Just as many choose St. Andrews for their maiden voyage to Scotland, this region tends to be the starting point for golf in Ireland.

Flying through Shannon Airport (SNN) near the city of Limerick, our most recent sojourn in the southwest took place over a week last October. Choosing this timeframe was pushing it, to be sure. Peak golf season in Ireland is May through September—as you get deeper into autumn, you’re more likely to find “tired” course conditions. More importantly, the chance of foul weather greatly increases, and you also have fewer hours of daylight to enjoy the game and travel between destinations. This time around, our luck held—days were mostly gloriously sunny and clear, though with high winds and temperatures in the low fifties, we found ourselves wearing rain gear simply for warmth.

The southwest’s golf portfolio, led by giants Ballybunion and Lahinch and backed by international-caliber layouts like Waterville and Tralee, can stand with any true links destination in the world. One disadvantage, however, is that geography and infrastructure conspire to make travel between courses either an “adventure” or a “headache,” depending on your perspective. Our advice: Consider a tour operator (contact us for suggestions), or be prepared for your trusty GPS to send
you on some hair-raising back road adventures. Either way, don’t over-schedule the golf. There’s so much to see and do off the golf course, and you’ll want to be off the road by sunset in order to enjoy the true heart of Irish social life—the pubs.

**THE GOLF**

The logistics of flight plans from Shannon tend to guide itineraries toward beginning and/or ending with a handful of courses near the airport: Adare Manor (currently closed for renovation), Lahinch, and Trump International Golf Links Ireland (the property formerly known as Doonbeg). This time around, our schedule required us to begin at the end of the line, at Waterville Golf Links (Rating: A). Though it’s remote, we always enjoy making the journey to Waterville. Situated at the southwestern extreme of the Ring of Kerry, the town is aptly named, for it is here that scenic Lough Curran meets the Atlantic. Golf has been played in the sand dunes at the edge of town since the 1880s, but the course today is the product of two architects—Eddie Hackett (the Johnny Appleseed of Irish golf) and Tom Fazio, who has consulted for the club since the early 2000s.

One common observation/critique about Waterville is that thanks to Fazio’s influence, it is more of an “Americanized” links. Yes, compared to its peers, the fairways and greens are flatter, and there’s considerably more eye-candy bunkering—but this shouldn’t deter you from adding it to an itinerary. Far from it. Waterville is fun and playable throughout, and the back nine is particularly exciting. The run of quality begins with the dogleg-right par-five 11th, where a big drive will kick downhill, leaving the potential to get home in two, albeit often from a downhill lie to an uphill green. This is followed by the 12th, the storied “Mass Hole,” which refers to the deep hollow short of the green where, long ago, persecuted Catholics would hold their services in secret.

Other homeward highlights include the 16th, a short dogleg-left par four, and the 17th, a one-shooter that offers glorious views from “Mulcahy’s Peak” (so named for the modern club’s founder). From this windswept pinnacle tee, take measure of the open green front and consider a punched or running shot.

Waterville’s staff excels at the warm Irish welcome, but the club also fully embraces its American connections. The recently renovated and expanded clubhouse is loaded with patriotic tributes to everyone from Payne Stewart (a former club captain) to President George H.W. Bush. For many, Waterville will feel like a home away from home.

The next morning, under gloriously clear skies, we embarked on a 36-hole day. Our first stop was Dooks Golf Links (Rating: A-), just an hour’s drive from Waterville. A sign on the way to the first tee implores that the links be reserved for “Bona Fide Golfers Only,” but the truth is Dooks is a place that any reasonably competent player can love. The course tips out at a shade under 6,600 yards with a slope of 122, so it’s not especially difficult. Rather, Dooks is the textbook definition of “sporty” golf, set in a drop-dead gorgeous environment. Like Waterville, the course extends onto a peninsula and offers grand views of the ocean, estuary, and mountains beyond.

Dooks wastes little time carrying the golfer into its dreamlike dunescape. After a straightforward but challenging opener, the 2nd, a wide-open par four of just 318 yards, practically begs the player to drive its gorgeous infinity-edge green. The stretch from the 5th through the 7th is topnotch, as a gettable short par five is sandwiched between two of the toughest two-shot holes, both of which snake through narrow notches in the sand hills. Another super par five is found at the 10th, which traces a long arc against the beach. Golfers must contend with this out-of-bounds on either their first or second shot to have any hope of an approach angle into its truly wild green, a turtle-backed complex in which the high right side is tilted a good 30 degrees above the left. Beyond this hole is a stretch of virgin linksland that is already owned by the club. Dooks, which has a standing relationship with the architect Martin Hawtree, intends to build a handful of new holes out here as soon as it is financially feasible. Today’s layout loses a bit of steam toward the end as the routing moves onto plainer ground, so this development would almost certainly make a wonderful course even better.

After lunch, we continued north another hour to Tralee Golf Club (Rating: A-), which stands as arguably the most spectacular design in the late Arnold Palmer’s portfolio. It certainly made a striking contrast with the little gem box at Dooks. While the morning round was intimate, rustic and quirky, Tralee is grand-scale golf, with big dunes, bigger ocean views, and a clean, modern appearance.
Late in 2015, the club. In the North, Royal County Down and Lahinch.

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2016 was decidedly a transitional year for the Old Course at Ballybunion Golf Club (Rating: B+). Late in 2015, the club made the bold and risky decision to convert all eighteen of its greens, which had been draining poorly and therefore often got soft and less than “linksy,” to fine fescue turf. The work was completed last spring and while the greens look healthy, fescue, with its deep root system, simply takes time to bed down. The putting surfaces were slow, and though they weren’t bumpy, the ball just didn’t react to contours in the way one might expect. Rest assured, it’s still one of the game’s great courses, and our relatively low grade should be temporary. Hopefully a winter of rest has done the course a world of good. If you have Ballybunion on your dance card this year, we’d love for you to let us know how it is playing.

The Old’s exhausted conditioning was hardly a deterrent to the hordes of golfers, most of them American, still stomping their way through its grand dunes at season’s bitter end. You can’t really blame them—holes like the 7th and 11th are as good as seaside golf gets—but our 11:10 a.m. start culminated five and a half hours later, a shocking pace of play, especially by Irish standards. We fear that Ballybunion has reached the point where you have to approach it like Pebble Beach—get out early, or be prepared to do a lot of standing around.

Ballybunion’s clubhouse is sometimes mocked for its goofy, blocky exterior, but the truth is it’s pretty nice on the inside. The men’s locker room is spacious and offers powerful, hot showers from saucer-sized heads, and the upstairs lounge, which overlooks the 18th, is a fine place for a Guinness or a light meal. It’s also worth noting that if you’re having issues with your swing, Ballybunion, unlike many Irish clubs, has a complete practice facility (driving range, putting green, short-game area) across the street.

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Well-traveled friends will have differences of opinion when arguing about Ireland’s best course, but no debate on this subject is complete without someone advocating for Lahinch Golf Club (Rating: A+). In the North, Royal County Down may be more beautiful, and Royal Portrush may emphasize stronger shot values, but no course puts Lahinch in the shade for variety and overall “fun factor.” The links, which dates back to 1892, is most famous for its twin masterpieces of quirk first set down by Old Tom Morris. The 4th hole, Klondyke, a short par five that features a tee shot through a natural valley followed by a thrilling vault over a towering mound, gives as much pleasure today as the day it was built. So does the next hole, the iconic par three Dell, in which the player changes orientation with the wind 180 degrees to play a short-iron flip over another mound to a (usually) blind hole location. But there’s more to Lahinch than just Old Tom—you’ll also find holes by the equally legendary Alister MacKenzie at the 9th and 14th, both of which feature ingeniously sculpted green complexes. Martin

Crossing the River Shannon into County Clare via the Tarbert car ferry (€18/one way), our last stops were at Trump International Golf Links Ireland (Rating: A-) and Lahinch. One of Donald Trump’s first moves upon acquiring Doonbeg was to hire Martin Hawtree, his architectural collaborator at Turnberry and Aberdeen, to renovate Greg Norman’s 2002 links. The Shark’s hole corridors mostly remain intact, but Hawtree reconfigured all of the greens with an eye toward improving their “fairness” or playability. For example, past visitors who got stymied by the Riviera-like bunker in the middle of the 12th green may find the news of its deletion heartening. Unfortunately, Mother Nature has made some renovations, too, due to serious erosion issues. A couple of winters ago, the green of the famous 14th, which sat on a tiny shelf of the primary dune, was lost to the waves. Back in 2007, we wrote that this hole was “almost certainly Ireland’s greatest short par three.” A chunk of fairway on the 18th was also wiped out. Both holes have been replaced in altered form, but it’s not a criticism to say that they’re not quite the same.

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Hawtree has been consulting at the club of late—during our visit, operators were busy shaping new tees for the par-three 8th, as well as improving drainage in low-lying areas of the 15th through 17th.

Lahinch takes the golfer on a journey through a diverse set of landscapes. Moving first into the wild high dunes and out to the coast, it proceeds along the banks of the Inagh River and stretches of fascinating interior linksland before making its final run back to town. Back at the clubhouse, the visitor will find a helpful staff and friendly local members. Unfortunately, Lahinch’s famous weather-predicting herd of livestock is long gone. For years, a sign reading “See Goats” was posted next to a broken barometer—if the animals were huddled by the clubhouse, it meant foul weather was coming—but taking in the 270-degree views from the second-story grill room is a decent substitute. Lahinch, in short, is a course that should be at the heart of every southwestern itinerary.

Editor’s Note: While in Waterville, we also got an exclusive insider’s look at Hogs Head Golf Club, a private retreat built adjacent to Waterville House on the site of the former Skellig Bay Golf Club. We’ll give you the scoop on this new Robert Trent Jones II design in the coming months.

The best lodging in Ireland’s southwest, by a comfortable margin, is found at Trump International Golf Links Ireland (Rating: A). Visions of ornate fountains, gold fixtures and other flamboyant touches may jump to mind, but Trump’s investment here has been almost entirely on the golf side. Doonbeg’s previous owner, Kiawah Development Partners, created the clubhouse and accommodations, and the quality throughout is superb. The resort offers a wide array of lodging options. At the high end are a series of clubhouse suites (many of which are owned by members and placed in a rental pool), but visitors can also choose standard rooms or links cottages, which are a short ride from the clubhouse. Floor plans vary, but all feature appealing timbered ceilings, rainfall showers, home-like interior design and ultra-luxurious bedding.

In the past, Waterville’s lodging matrix was fairly straightforward. At the high end, there was Waterville House, the elegant (if rather formal) former home of Waterville GL founder John Mulcahy. And in the mid-range, there was the Butler Arms, where Payne Stewart famously pulled pints of Guinness for a packed bar after winning the 1999 US Open. In mid-2015, though, a welcome addition arrived in the form of the Sea Lodge (Rating: B+), a 12-room boutique hotel in the heart of the village. This environmentally friendly property is owned and operated by a brother-and-sister team. Public areas and guest rooms alike are spotless, bright, and stylishly decorated. Our chamber (#2) was only average in size, but it more than compensated for this with comfort, not to mention delightful views of the village and ocean. A stay at the Sea Lodge should certainly be on your radar for your next visit to Waterville.

Our best discovery of the trip, however, may well have been the Armada Hotel (Rating: B+), in the small town of Spanish Point, an equidistant 15 minutes between Lahinch and Doonbeg. This well-designed, modern hotel does a good job of telling the story of Spanish Point—so named for the shipwrecked survivors of King Philip’s ruined fleet who came ashore here in 1588—and its concierge staff excel at directing visitors to local points of interest. Though the decor in the hotel’s good-sized rooms is somewhat generic compared to the public areas, the beds are nice and the showers hot and strong. WiFi is free but a half-tick slow. Be sure to request an ocean-facing chamber; ours offered only a graceless view of the parking lot.

Unfortunately, we also made a “negative discovery” in Ballybunion. With our favorite place in town, Teach de Broc, booked solid, we took a flyer on Kilcooly’s Country House (Rating: D), which boasts a can’t-miss-it location on Main Street. Don’t let the pleasing exterior fool you—Kilcooly’s is only acceptable as a last resort. While our room (#7) was big, the king mattress was hard and uncomfortable. The decor throughout the hotel is out of style by at least a half-century, and while the service was passable, the place felt gloomy, even a bit seedy. Worst of all, at €130 per night Kilcooly’s did not come close to delivering good value.

On this trip, the one thing we sacrificed by running on a tight schedule was the time to seek out unique restaurants—we simply ate in the various hotels. Down in Waterville, the Sea Lodge
(Rating: B+) offered an above-average fish-and-chips in a pleasant environment. Kilcooly’s (Rating: C+) had a good steak sandwich with twice-cooked fries, but the portion seemed undersized for the price. By far the best spot we found along the way was Johnny Burke’s (Rating: A), the pub just off the lobby of the Armada Hotel in Spanish Point. You’ll likely be startled by the change when passing from the hotel’s modern foyer into this classic Irish pub—indeed, this is because the entire hotel grew up around it. Burke’s is all dark wood and low light, walls crammed with old photos and artwork (including the obligatory JFK and Pope above the fireplace), friendly staff and locals, and if you are lucky, live traditional music. But it’s not just atmospheric—the pub food is really good. Don’t miss the out-of-this-world seafood chowder with seaweed dust and spring onion. The ten-ounce sirloin of local farmer Noel O’Connor’s beef, served with a green peppercorn sauce, was similarly delightful. The pub also boasts a “Whiskey Bible” which specializes in rare Irish spirits.

As good as Ireland’s southwest is for golf, it’s just as appealing off the course. Non-golfing spouses should have no trouble staying busy. Killarney, as a sizable town, makes a great base both for shopping and outdoor activities—the Gap of Dunloe and Killarney National Park are both musts for hikers. Though it’s a full hour from Tralee, the Dingle Oceanworld Aquarium is a winner of a rainy day activity for kids. Lahinch, for its part, is a surf town with just a hint of a bohemian edge. Our scheduled free afternoons happened to fall during the County Clare part of the trip, so we checked out the awe-inspiring, 700-foot-tall Cliffs of Moher, which are only 10-15 minutes from Lahinch. The next day, we drove up to the village of Doolin, famed for its traditional music scene, and took the ferry out to Inisheer, the closest of the Aran Islands. A handful of companies make this run—we used Doolin2Aran (doolin2aranferries.com) and had no issues with their service. Though you may be pushed to the edge of seasickness on the way out when the boat is working against the waves, it’s worth it to visit these rocky Atlantic outposts where time seems to stands still.
On our most recent return to Arizona, we stretched the boundaries of the endlessly sprawling Phoenix/Scottsdale golf mecca by making our way to Wickenburg, an old cowboy town 75 miles from Phoenix SkyHarbor Airport and almost exactly an hour west of The Boulders resort. Rancho de Los Caballeros, a historic dude ranch that boasts a very good golf course designed by Gary Nash and Jeff Hardin, served as our base on a long weekend getaway that also included a game at the splendid new Wickenburg Ranch Golf Club, which officially opened in 2015. Wickenburg Ranch doesn’t offer resort lodging, but it is just 10 miles from Los Caballeros. If you are looking for another course to round out a first-rate desert itinerary, pencil in Quintero. Located midway between Wickenburg and The Boulders, it’s one of our favorite Arizona eighteens (see GOLF ODYSSEY, February 2014).

Wickenburg is named after Henry Wickenburg, a prospector who struck gold at Vulture Mountain in the 1860s. The Vulture Mine became the most productive gold mine in Arizona history. Thanks to the Hassayampa River, Wickenburg’s wide-open landscape soon became fertile ground for ranching and farming. Capitalizing on the mystique of the Old West, the first “guest ranch” began hosting vacationing Easterners in 1913. By the 1960s, Wickenburg had 14 guest ranches and was known as the “dude ranch capital of the world.” Though the bulk of the dude ranches have closed and Wickenburg is now known as a rehab retreat for those recovering from eating disorders and various types of addictions, the family-owned Rancho de Los Caballeros is still going strong.

We like Wickenburg because it offers respite from the hustle, bustle, and traffic congestion of Phoenix and Scottsdale. The desert, abundant sunshine, and crisp fresh air reign supreme, and it’s a glorious place for nighttime stargazing. At 2,200 feet above sea level (twice the elevation of Phoenix), it’s also on average at least five degrees cooler than Phoenix. Frankly, we would have ventured back sooner (our prior visit was well over a decade ago) had more golf been on offer.

At Rancho de Los Caballeros, the “ranch of the gentlemen,” the daily rhythms since 1948 have centered on horseback riding, though now there’s also a spa, pool, tennis courts, and a full-scale nature program. The resort is especially popular with girlfriend groups, couples, and families that find it an idyllic escape from city routines. Nightly rates that include the Full American Meal Plan make it a very good deal. Even better, with the opening of Wickenburg Ranch, which has quickly gained notice as one of Arizona’s fine eighteens, and the proximity of Quintero, Rancho de Los Caballeros is now an attractive option for a golf-centric getaway. Just be aware that while Los Caballeros Golf Club welcomes play all year round, Rancho de Los Caballeros resort is only open seasonally, from early October to Mother’s Day.

Editor’s Note: Though most guests arrive from Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport (PHX), private flyers can use Wickenburg Municipal Airport (E25). The airstrip is only about 10 minutes from Rancho de Los Caballeros and Wickenburg Ranch.

Located at Rancho de Los Caballeros, Los Caballeros Golf Club (Rating: B) is a circa-1980 Gary Nash-Jeff Hardin-designed parkland-style eighteen that overlooks Vulture Mountain and the Bradshaw Range. Aided by the club’s own well and irrigation system, Los Caballeros features lush grass from tee to green. Though the natural desert lies beyond the fairways, there are no forced carries over sagebrush and cacti on this very playable and enjoyable layout.
The par-72 routing stretches from 5,264 to 7,020 yards (137 slope) from five judiciously spaced sets of tee markers. While the front nine is fairly wide with large greens, the more compelling and attractive back nine incorporates dramatic rolling hills and frequent elevation changes.

Los Caballeros’ most memorable test is the par-five 13th. Maxing out at 605 yards, this three-shooter features a rollercoaster fairway that leads to a small, plateau green defended by a front-right bunker. Be advised that you may be blocked out by a tree if you are approaching too far from the right.

Conditions were very good when we played, although the grass on the tee boxes was somewhat long and hairy. Los Caballeros plays long—the fairways typically don’t yield a lot of run-out. The quick, undulating, elevated greens pose the chief defense of par. Bear in mind putts break away from Vulture Peak.

Los Caballeros’ friendly staff sends players off with a wish to have fun. Here 40 to 50 rounds is considered a busy day, another welcome contrast from Phoenix/Scottsdale facilities. Los Caballeros permits walking by members and resort guests. The greens and tees are pretty close to each other, and many members commonly walk. Rounds normally take under four hours.

Warm-up facilities include a driving range, practice bunker and putting green. The clubhouse restaurant, which is open for lunch, offers seating inside and on the patio, where the view is delightful.

Wickenburg Ranch Golf Club (Rating: B+) rambles over what was once the late entertainer Merv Griffin’s ranch and a children’s rehab retreat. Anchoring an extensive Shea Homes real estate development, the golf course was actually fully constructed in 2008, though it did not open. The developers envisioned a private club reserved exclusively for community homeowners, members, and approved guests, but those plans were rocked when the Great Recession ground home building to a halt. The club maintained and tweaked the layout throughout seven long years of “down time.” When Wickenburg Ranch officially opened in 2015 it was mature and in outstanding condition. Some 100 houses have now been built, but they all sit well back from the playing field.

The layout is the creation of first-time designers Bill Brownlee and Wendell Pickett, whose primary expertise lies in landscaping master-planned communities. Six par threes, five par fives, and seven par fours make up the par-71 routing. Elevated tee boxes showcase views of Vulture Peak and Prescott National Forest on a broad-shouldered, rugged, visually stunning, and well-marked layout.

Wickenburg Ranch demands numerous pronounced forced carries over ravines, desert valleys, and dry washes. Though the layout is expansive, fairways can be narrow in spots. If you are not in the fairway, you are in a bunker or in the desert, as there's no rough here. A couple of tee shots present speed slots for those who can catch the correct side of the fairway inclines, mounds, and slopes. While we were able to work the ball off contoured features beside and backstopping some of the greens, balls hitting the backside of those same slopes will go careening deep into the desert. The par-three 2nd presents an early example of this yin and yang. Thankfully, our tee shot funneled onto the green from the high right-side embankment.

Wickenburg Ranch is full of wonderfully—and sometimes intimidatingly—framed holes. The 6th, Gutz, is a short and, for some, driveable par four that plays a little uphill to an elevated green. Though there's bailout room to the left, the name stems from the fact that those who go for it must take on a lake in front of the putting surface. The par-three 13th, Big Water, is a long, downhill par three that drops 100 feet from the 246-yard tips; while the green seems to protrude into the water, a beach-style bunker saves many a ball from a watery grave. Next up is a par five with water all down the left. The par fives tend to be the tightest holes on the course. On the par-five home hole, players confront no fewer than three desert crossings. Beware the hidden bunker over the ridgeline.
Because of the forced carries, choosing the proper tee box is critical. The four sets of markers range between 4,912 and 7,059 yards, though, curiously, several holes feature two sets of white and red tee boxes. Wickenburg Ranch was in excellent condition when we played it. Unlike most Phoenix/Scottsdale courses (but like Quintero), the fairways are Bermuda grass. The huge, elevated, two-tiered greens are very fast, though they hold shots quite well. The subtle breaks gave fits even to the members we played with.

Practice facilities at Wickenburg Ranch are superb. The short game area allows for putting, chipping, and bunker work. On the driving range you hit off grass in a gorgeous panoramic setting. Wickenburg Ranch's elegant new clubhouse was set to open as this issue went to press; it promises to be an inviting spot to relax with a beverage and a bite. By now the club should also have debuted its new fleet of electric golf carts with GPS, replacing the original noisy and irksome gas-powered carts.

Wickenburg Ranch also sports a nine-hole, walking-only par-three course that measures between 663 and 1,240 yards. Etched into the bowl of a canyon, Li’l Wick is an 18-acre “short game park” that features the same bentgrass greens as the big course. Bunkers behind some of the tees provide players with an opportunity to practice long fairway sand shots. The ambience at Li’l Wick is laidback. Music pipes through speakers, and there are no tee times and no dress code. Four of the holes are lighted for night play.

Rancho de Los Caballeros (Rating: A-), one of Wickenburg’s last remaining dude ranches, is a comfortable, easy-going, family-run retreat that offers something for everyone. Upon arriving at the resort, you drive past the horse corrals and tennis courts to the nicely landscaped main lodge. A rustic, Western aura imbues the interior, which features beamed ceilings, tile floors, and cowboy accents. In addition to the old registration counter, the building houses the dining room and saloon, a library, card room, and pool table. The resort pool is just outside.

The resort’s 79 rooms and suites spread out in single-story casita buildings arranged in a compact courtyard campus by the edge of the desert. All the accommodations, which feature a Southwest color scheme, desert and Old West motifs, and handcrafted furniture, are within a three- or four-minute walk of the main building.

The casitas come in a variety of sizes and floor plans. While some rooms we saw seemed well past their prime, we stayed in a recently updated Maricopa Suite with a king-size bed, a kitchenette with a refrigerator and microwave, and a spacious living area with a kiva fireplace, large television, sofa and chairs, dining/game table, and Murphy bed. Note that all the casitas have private patios and many connect with adjacent units.

Many guests request Sunset Rooms, which showcase a desert and mountain view from the patio. These chambers come with two queen beds, a window seat, and bathrooms with a jetted tub and separate shower; some units also have a kiva gas fireplace. Rooms 320, 321, and 322 in the Bradshaw Mountain room category, located farthest from the main lodge, are especially popular because the ranch horses run right by them in the mornings and late afternoons.

Every time we entered the main lodge it felt more like we were visiting a friend’s house than a formal resort. The pool table and the bountiful array of board games in frayed boxes enhanced the home-like ambience. We found the staff to be welcoming throughout our stay. The only inconvenience we experienced was when housekeeping knocked on our casita door at 8:10 a.m. on our last day to ask what time we were checking out.

Most guests of Rancho de Los Caballeros (Rating: B) stay on the Full American Plan that includes breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Breakfast and lunch in the main lodge are buffets. We had a delicious made-to-order omelet at breakfast but found the overall arrangement of the buffet to be somewhat less aesthetically pleasing than we were expecting. Lunch, which occurs in a rather narrow window from noon to 1:30, features salads, soups, cold cuts for building your own sandwiches, and a couple of hot entrées.

If you want to avoid the lunch buffet, you can enjoy sit-down service at the golf course. The menu at The Grill at Los Caballeros features salads, sandwiches, and burgers. The most coveted tables are out on the lovely patio overlooking the mountains.
Dinner is a signature occasion at the resort, as the ambience in the main lodge dining room turns more formal. In keeping with a long-standing tradition at the ranch, gentlemen must wear a sport coat or a Western vest and bolo tie. No worries if you don't travel with a jacket—the resort has a wide selection on hand. The cooking, while not likely to wow you, is far better than anything in town. Raves at our table went to the tortilla chicken soup, the grilled baby octopus, and the roasted New York steak prepared with bone marrow, blue cheese butter, and served with asparagus, baked potatoes, and cooked mushrooms. Note that the gratuity is added to the bill—no further tipping is expected.

Horseback riding is Rancho de los Caballeros’ calling card. The corral is home to about 100 horses. At 10 a.m. each morning, the wranglers help guests onto their horses (assigned based on each rider’s level of expertise). A single wrangler leads the way for 2.5 hours through the high desert terrain. Occasionally, there might be a special lunch cookout ride to Vulture Peak. It’s a two-hour ride up the mountain, followed by a one-hour lunch, and a two-hour ride back. Afternoons are devoted to family rides. Another popular ranch activity is Team Penning, where 3-4 guests and a wrangler try to herd cattle while on horseback into a 12 x 12 pen in the quickest possible time.

The Ranch offers abundant opportunities to commune with the surrounding environment and learn about desert flora and fauna. The resort's longtime resident naturalist leads guided hikes, nature walks, birdwatching tours, and nature horseback rides. He also heads an exploration of the Hassayampa River Preserve, where much different wildlife can be found.

The Spa at Los Caballeros occupies a converted ranch house just a short walk from the main lodge and casitas. The treatments pay homage to Native American and Old West traditions and make use of indigenous desert plants. We enjoyed the freshly baked cookies set out in the greeting/relaxation area before our massage. Note that there are no locker rooms, showers or wet areas—you will have to get ready for your spa session in your casita. The outdoor courtyard features a labyrinth.

Rancho de los Caballeros has a heated outdoor pool at the main lodge. The resort features two tennis courts and employs a tennis pro. Trap and skeet shooting is also on offer. One of the casitas serves as a small fitness room; it is equipped with a recumbent bike, rowing machine, treadmill and hand weights. Families can take advantage of the kids’ program; trained counselors lead group activities in morning and afternoon sessions.

Rancho de los Caballeros/Los Caballeros Golf Club
rancheloscaballeros.com; 800-684-5030 or 928-684-5484
loscaballerosgolf.com; 928-684-2704
79 rooms and suites from $260 on American Meal Plan.
Green fee: $60 to $85.
Aerification: staggered once a month on each course (utilizing small tines) in June, July, and August..

Wickenburg Ranch Golf & Social Club
wickenburgranch.com; 928-668-5535
Green fee: $80 to $130. Li’l Wick, $15 to $25.
Aerification: early June and early October before overseeding.

Though Rancho de Los Caballeros is generally a quiet retreat, the resort’s brightly colored saloon can be a fun place to hang out, especially when there’s live Western music. If you head into town, you will find some unremarkable restaurants and saloons as well as Western galleries, boutiques, and jewelry and craft shops. The must-see attraction is the Desert Caballeros Western Museum.
Aside from the occasional hurricane (a concern not to be treated lightly), Orlando boasts excellent weather year round and presents golfers with a treasure trove of places to play.

If you are looking for a budget destination with very good golf, you should consider the historic Mission Inn Resort & Club. Located off the beaten track in quiet Howey-In-The-Hills, some 47 miles from Orlando International Airport (MCO), it features two contrasting eightheens, the venerable, 1926-vintage El Campeón, and Las Colinas, a circa-1992 Gary Koch design.

The star attraction is El Campeón (Rating: B+), which is one of the oldest layouts in all of Florida. Though the course has been re-routed and expanded (most recently in 1964), the playing field dates back to 1917, when George O’Neil, a Chicago golf course architect, laid out the first nine holes. O’Neil ultimately created a full eighteen on a site that is just 10 minutes from the highest point in all of Florida. If you think Florida is nothing but flatlands, you will be astonished by this naturally hilly setting that features nearly 100 feet of elevation change. With tree-lined fairways and very few residential buildings around, this highly atmospheric vintage layout seems less like a Florida track and more like a classic parkland test you might find in the Northeast or Midwest.

El Campeón’s numerous downhill tee shots provide excellent looks at holes that typically rise on the approaches to small, elevated greens. Though the course can be stretched to 7,001 yards from the longest of the six sets of tee markers, a premium is placed on accuracy to avoid the ubiquitous tall trees and the water that enters the fray on 13 holes. The Ultradwarf Bermuda greens undulate quite a bit and roll between 9 and 10.5 on the Stimpmeter. This Florida jewel has played host to the last four Florida State High School Championships and has hosted numerous NCAA national competitions.

Mission Inn Resort & Club’s prized eighteen, Las Colinas (Rating: B), is a more traditional Florida test. Gary Koch’s design rambles along somewhat flatter ground and weaves its way amidst a residential development. Though Los Colinas is longer (7,230 yards from the tips) and water is present on 12 holes, this is the resort’s player-friendly layout. The par fives are a strength. Las Colinas’ no. 1 handicap test is the very reachable but extremely narrow 12th, Alligator Alley, which is lined by tall oaks and culminates at an elevated green. Just like El Campeón, Las Colinas is very well maintained.

The resort’s practice facilities include a large driving range, practice bunkers with target greens, and a putting green. The Gary Anderson Schematic Golf School is also based here.

Mission Inn Resort & Club, which spreads over 1,100 picturesque acres, isn’t a fancy place. It’s been owned by the same family for over 50 years. Though not for guests that put a premium on new or updated facilities, the resort does exude a friendly, comfortable and historic vibe. Accommodations range from hotel rooms and suites to two- and three-bedroom villas with kitchens. Guests enjoy access to three restaurants, two lounges, and a poolside bar.

Besides golf, resort activities include a tennis club with eight courts (six are Har-Tru); fitness center; trap and skeet shooting; marina on Lake Harris with boat rentals and fishing equipment; heated outdoor pool; and excellent opportunities for hiking and biking. The Marbella Spa features five treatment rooms.

A number of stay-and-play golf packages provide excellent value. Be sure to check the website for specials marking El Campeón’s 100th birthday. Even if you don’t stay overnight, Mission Inn Resort’s hidden gems are worth the drive when you are in Orlando.

Mission Inn Resort & Club
missioninnresort.com; 800-874-9053 or 352-324-3101
176 rooms and suites from $139 to $400.
Green fee: $75 to $120.
Aerification: June, July, and August, one course at a time.
Turks and Caicos

A Cure for the Winter Blues, No Clubs Necessary

Whenever we start to suffer from a case of the winter doldrums, Turks and Caicos always ranks high on our short list of quick beach getaways. Situated just south of the Bahamas and east of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, this island archipelago is a British Crown Colony that uses the US dollar as its official currency. Though eight of the 40 islands and cays are inhabited, the epicenter of Turks and Caicos tourism is the 12-mile-long Grace Bay Beach on the island of Providenciales, commonly called Provo. Providenciales International Airport (PLS) is just a short, 90-minute flight from Miami. Better still, we’ve flown direct from both JFK and Newark in the morning and been able to hit the fabulous beach in the afternoon. With splendid weather, an array of hotels and resorts as well as villas and condos, intriguing restaurants, and a decent, generally well-maintained golf course, Turks and Caicos can make for an idyllic getaway.

We should say up front that Turks and Caicos is not a golf destination, but rather a beach destination that happens to have a golf course. It is certainly not the kind of place to plan a golf-centric holiday. In fact, it struck us as kind of ironic that David Feherty is the official ambassador of the lone eighteen, Provo Golf Club (Rating: C+). While the layout doesn’t rank among the Caribbean’s top courses, it can satisfy a winter golf fix if your expectations aren’t excessively high.

Designed by Karl Litten, who earned his stripes as chief designer for Von Hagge and Devlin, Inc., this circa-1992 layout resembles a typical Florida eighteen. None of the holes are especially memorable. The course rambles over relatively flat, rocky terrain with limestone outcroppings dotting the fairways. Water comes into play on 12 holes, though, alas, the hazards are in the form of seven lakes rather than the ocean. Provo Golf Club may be just off Grace Bay Beach but the routing tracks inland with nary a view of the sea.

While the front nine meanders amidst residential home lots, the stronger back nine exudes a more natural, desert feel. Many of the holes are fairly tight, particularly off the tee where you frequently must contend with some combination of water, expansive waste areas, trees and foliage, and OB markers. The signature test is 17, where the rock-wall-lined green is practically an island. Four sets of painted conch shell tee markers provide a setup ranging from 5,331 yards to 6,719 yards. We enjoyed it from the 6,344-yard blue markers. Provo is not overly difficult, but the sea breezes can make it tricky. Throughout our two rounds, we confronted a steady two-club wind.

The playing field is generally in fine condition, thanks in no small part to the ample water for irrigation supplied by the water company that owns the course. You will find TifEagle Bermuda greens, Bermuda fairways, and Paspalum teeing areas. Practice facilities include a putting green, chipping area, and a warm-up net with five stalls where you can hit off mats. The club’s golf shop is well stocked and the staff inside and out is welcoming, friendly, and helpful. Fairways Bar and Grill is open for breakfast and lunch every day and dinner on Fridays and Saturdays. We recommend a rum punch at this 19th hole.

A laid-back vibe pervades the club. It’s never too busy unless there’s an outing. If you catch the course on a slow day—we like playing on Saturday or Sunday, when Provo’s villa renters are busy settling in or checking out—you may be able to squeeze in an entire round in a quick three hours. The club invites kids under 15 to play for free after 10:30 a.m. when accompanied by a paying adult. Our rental clubs consisted of TaylorMade sticks that were a generation or two out of date, but they were more than satisfactory. Players also receive two sleeves of golf balls with each eighteen-hole rental.

Most of Provo’s resorts are set along Grace Bay Beach, no more than a 15-minute drive from the airport. Lodging options run the gamut from villa and condo rentals to resorts such as the all-inclusive, adults-only Club Med, one of the oldest havens...
COMING IN THE MONTHS AHEAD...

A fresh look at Hilton Head Island's Sea Pines Resort; Monarch Beach Resort; Where to play in Lexington, Kentucky; and highlights in the French countryside

One activity we highly recommend is horseback riding. Provo Ponies (provoponies.com) offers riding instruction for beginners as well as exhilarating guided trail rides. The biggest thrill comes on the stretch along Long Bay Beach, when the horses go into the water. Skilled riders may even be able to take their horse for an actual swim. Note that in peak season, these rides book up well in advance.

Aside from its gorgeous sand and surf, Turks and Caicos doesn't have a lot of tourist attractions. Many people visit the Caicos Conch Farm, just 10 minutes from the Grace Bay Club, to learn about the life cycle of the queen conch. Note that if you rent a car to explore the island, driving here is on the left side of the road. Also be advised that many of the roads are rather rough.

Provo Golf Club
provogolfclub.com; 877-218-9124
Green fee: $145 to $185.
Aerification: twice between late May and late September.

Beaches and water activities such as snorkeling and diving highlight a Turks and Caicos visit. The elongated, crescent-shaped Grace Bay Beach, with its powdery white sand, is perennially rated one of North America's most beautiful beaches, though you will find stunning sand and surf all over the island. Most of the best snorkeling is off the northern shores and accessible only by boat. Smith's Reef, near the western edge of Grace Bay, is one of the best and most convenient spots you can explore from shore.

While it is not overly difficult, Provo has some tight holes

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