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The New Golf Vacation: Quicker, Easier and More Fun

Golf resorts in top destinations—from Pinehurst to Cabo San Lucas—are breaking with tradition, offering players of all skill levels quicker, more playful ways to tee off. Plus: The best par-three courses in the U.S.



HAPPIER HOUR The Li'l Wick par-three course at Arizona's Wickenburg Ranch, surrounds an open-air bar; music streams across the greens. PHOTO: WICKENBURG RANCH GOLF & SOCIAL CLUB

By
John Paul Newport

GOLF, AS EVERYONE knows, is an extremely serious game. Golf announcers whisper. Players line up their putts as if they were heart surgeons preparing to operate. The primary golf emotion seems to be anguish.

And yet, what's this? Rising from a pint-size, sand-sculpted golf course near the stately Pinehurst Resort clubhouse in North Carolina is the unmistakable sound of...gaiety and laughter! Undisguised frivolity! Spontaneous good cheer!

The tiny, nine-hole short course is called the Cradle. Since opening in October it has transformed the vibe around Pinehurst, one of America's most esteemed and storied golf institutions. The Cradle is a par-three course, just 789 yards long and almost always packed. Who plays it? Beginners and casual golfers on vacation. Parents with their children and grandchildren. Gangs of unaccompanied kids. Husbands and wives. But also, in approximately equal number, serious golfers after their super-serious rounds on Pinehurst's regular courses. Grown men sometimes play the Cradle barefoot and are often the ones doing the whooping and hollering.

The Cradle is at the forefront of a trend to give golfers, nongolfers and those in between quicker, more enticing ways to experience the game. The efforts include an emphasis on fast nine-hole rounds instead of the standard 18, motorized golfboards on which players can "surf" the course rather than walk or ride in a cart, and llamas and goats used as caddies (don't expect reliable shot advice from either). The new breed of par-three courses are a far cry from the flat, featureless par-three courses many people remember from their childhoods. Most of the holes at the Cradle—designed by Gil Hanse, a celebrated golf architect whose credits include the 2016 Olympics course in Brazil—are short. The longest, a downhiller, extends only 127 yards. Six of the other holes are between 56 and 92

yards. All nine can be successfully negotiated with a putter off the tee, assuring the course's popularity with beginners and low-skill players. It's real golf, but you don't have to be a real golfer.



The Cradle, a new nine-hole short course at Pinehurst, N.C.

But accomplished golfers also consider the Cradle a worthy challenge with its undulating greens and their surrounding humps, runoffs and sand bunkers. Skilled players are invited to carve shots that bank off the slopes just so and roll up right next to the holes tucked in tricky locations. That's why you hear so many expert players cheering—that and the old-timey beverage cart called the Pinecone, which is parked at a central crossroads of the course and serves cocktails and four kinds of draft beer. In the late afternoon, baby boomer-friendly music wafts across the course, piped in through speakers disguised as rocks.

It costs \$50 to play the Cradle, which might seem steep but not when compared with the \$400-plus rate to play the nearby Pinehurst No. 2 course. Same-day replays are free (if they can fit you in) and the fee is waived entirely for kids under 18 when accompanied by a paying adult, encouraging family fun. Imagine a golfing getaway with the brood, not just the buddies.

Next to the Cradle, smack next to the clubhouse, is a rolling, 75,000-square-foot putting green called Thistle Dhu (for "this'll do," attributed to an early Pinehurst resident on first seeing his home and a golf course there). Like the Cradle, Thistle Dhu is typically crawling with golfers, especially at the end of the day. Groundskeepers lay out an ever-changing putting course of 18 holes, whose starting points are marked by posts that double as drink holders. You'd be surprised how intense the competition sometimes gets between grandmas and their teenage grandkids at Thistle Dhu, which is free for resort guests. Completing the picture is the adjacent, feature-rich short-game practice area, fun to goof around on for golfers of a certain persuasion, and the driving range and golf school. "For someone to leave Pinehurst without playing any golf would be like visiting a vineyard and not drinking any wine," said Tom Pashley, the resort's president. These days, even nongolfers have no reason to miss out.

High-quality, well-designed par-three courses as adjuncts to regular-length courses are not new but historically most were found at rich private clubs. Three of the top four courses on Golf Digest's top 100 in the U.S.—Pine Valley, Augusta National and Shinnecock—have associated par-three courses. In recent years, however, par-threes have started popping up at golf resorts to cater to vacationers.



Llama caddies at North Carolina's Sherwood Forest Golf Club. PHOTO: TIM ROBISON

Bandon Dunes, on the southern coast of Oregon, opened its 13-hole Bandon Preserve par-three course in 2012. Designed by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, who also built the resort's Bandon Trails course and many other sought-after tracks, the Preserve occupies a prime spot of real estate overlooking the Pacific. The resort also has a well-used, 100,000-square-foot putting green much like Thistle Dhu, with a nearby bar.

Mike Keiser, the force behind Bandon Dunes, tapped Messrs. Coore and Crenshaw to build another par-three course, called the Sandbox, at his newest multicourse resort, Sand Valley, in the rolling sandy-soil terrain of central Wisconsin. The Sandbox opened for play in May. Both of the Coore-Crenshaw short courses are meant to be walked with a few clubs only and pose clever challenges for golfers at all skill levels.

The latest resort to emphasize par-three courses is Big Cedar Lodge, surrounded by 3,000 acres of Ozark Mountain wilderness 8 miles south of tourist magnet Branson, Mo., with its theme parks and country music bars. Big Cedar's developer and owner, Johnny Morris, the billionaire founder of Bass Pro Shops, recently developed a sweet tooth for golf courses and is bent on making Big Cedar a golf Mecca. Two of the resort's three existing courses are par-threes, but two more courses by big-name designers are in the works. A Coore-Crenshaw course will open this fall, followed by a Tiger Woods design next year.

Neither of the par-threes is as cuddly as the Cradle, but both have grand views of the Ozarks and are the only par-three courses ever to have been used in an official PGA Tour-sanctioned competition. Top of the Rock, by Jack Nicklaus, is a serious golf course that opened in 2014. From the back tees, its holes range from 202 yards to 114 yards, with several requiring shots over water. Players take carts because of the steep changes in elevation. Chiseled out of granite atop a pristine wooded mountain, the course abounds in flowers. Swans glide across the ponds. Many of the holes look west over Table Rock Lake, making a late afternoon round followed by sunset drinks and dinner on the clubhouse terrace an ideal choice. It will cost you, however. The green fee is \$135 for nine holes, \$90 for a replay.

'An old-timey beverage cart parked on the course serves cocktails and four kinds of draft beer.'

Next to the Rock is a unique driving range designed by Arnold Palmer, featuring tier upon tier of artificially turfed greens surrounded by bunkers and ponds. Immediately adjacent, originally, was a sprawling Tom Watson-designed putting green called the Himalayas,

named after the mother of all recreational putting greens at St. Andrews in Scotland. But in May 2015 an enormous sinkhole opened up and swallowed the Himalayas. Undeterred, Morris rebuilt the Himalayas green at his other par-three course, Mountain Top, 9 miles away. Also perched atop a mountain, albeit not a forested one, it's much more beginner-friendly. The green fee here is a slightly more reasonable (although perhaps temporary) \$75, with replays for \$50. Mountain Top will share a clubhouse with Tiger Woods's new course. Mr. Woods is a big fan of par-three courses. He has talked movingly about his first golf experiences on par-three courses in Southern California and has incorporated new-style par-threes at two of his recent projects, private Bluejack National in Houston and the Diamante Resort in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.

Travelers can find other par-three course innovations scattered across the country in places where they can easily combine a golf game with other diversions. At Arizona's Wickenburg Ranch, 70 miles northwest of Phoenix, the Li'l Wick par-three course surrounds an open-air bar and 8-acre lake. Music streams across the greens, the final four holes are lit for night play and golfers wearing flip-flops and cutoffs are warmly welcomed. In Las Vegas, the low-key Cloud 9 par-three course, with holes mimicking famous short holes from around the world, is also lit at night, as is the adjacent nine-hole, natural grass putting course. The Heartwell par-three course in Long Beach, Calif., where Tiger learned to play, stages Friday evening "glow ball" events, where players hit luminescent balls.

If such departures from tradition strike "true golfers" as a sacrilege, Pinehurst author and historian Chris Buie begs to differ. He noted that whimsically titled events called "frolics" were popular among American golf's early devotees. In one such competition at Pinehurst called "monkey golf," each player carried a single club and catcalls during backswings were actively encouraged.

"The lighthearted aspect of golf got lost along the way," Mr. Buie said. "Somehow the game's core narrative shifted from health-based to one of intense competition. These new courses are helping to bring things back into balance." For vacationers looking to fill their holiday with more fun and less formality (and zero anguish), these new-breed courses might just strike the best balance of all.

EASY PICKINGS // Par-Three Courses at Top Resorts With Enough Diversions to Keep Even Newbies Entertained

The Cradle at Pinehurst Resort, Pinehurst, N.C.

This short and quirky course caters to all skill levels. Adjacent: the 75,000-square foot Thistle Dhu putting course and a short-game practice area. Non-golf attractions: spa and pool complex, shopping in quaint nearby towns, available skeet-shooting and fishing and a chance to read in a rocking chair on the famous veranda. *Hotel stay from \$399 a night at the Carolina Hotel, pinehurst.com*

Bandon Preserve at Bandon Dunes, Bandon, Ore.

Bandon Preserve, one of the five courses at this remote, immensely popular golf resort, encompasses 13 holes overlooking the Pacific. The course requires strategy to play well, but the proudly mediocre can delight in the scenery. Non-golf attractions: massage, gym, hiking, fishing, bird watching. Comfortable, no-frills rooms. *Hotel stay from \$280 a night in summer for a four-bedroom suite, bandondunesgolf.com*

Top of the Rock and Mountain Top, Big Cedar Lodge, Ridgedale, Mo.

Beautifully landscaped Top of the Rock delivers great sunset views of Table Rock Lake. Mountain Top, with long views of the Ozark Mountains, is more beginner-friendly. Non-golf attractions: pools, spa, lake activities and a buzzing kids center with laser tag and bumper cars; live music and amusement parks in nearby Branson. *Hotel stay from \$310 a night in summer, bigcedar.com*

Threetops at Treetops Resort, Gaylord, Mich.

Part of a five-course resort in northern Michigan, Threetops is a gorgeous, well-designed, hilly challenge through hardwood forests. For many years it was the site of ESPN's Par-3 Shootout with famous Tour players. Non-golf attractions: spa, horseback riding, watersports, tennis, biking. *Hotel stay from \$129 a night or from \$250 for a two-bedroom condominium, treetops.com*

Oasis Short Course, Diamante Resort, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.

With its innovative Tiger Woods design, lush vegetation and an eight-acre lake, Oasis can be played as a 12-hole par-three course or in various loops of longer holes. Non-golf attractions: beach, spa, nearby shopping, restaurants and party bars; available fishing and diving. *Hotel stay from \$400 a night for a standard room, from \$1,700 for a villa, diamantecabosanlucas.com*

Peter Hay Golf Course, Pebble Beach Resort, Calif.

The holes at this public nine-holer, built in 1957 and across the street from the famed Pebble Beach Links, are simple and short (the longest is 104 yards) but the location is divine. You might be paired with caddies before or after rounds at the big course. Green fees run just \$30 for adults, \$10 for ages 13 to 17 and free for 12 and under. *Hotel stay from \$900 a night at the Lodge at Pebble Beach, pebblebeach.com*