

Chambers Bay/Salish Cliffs, WA



When leaving Sea-Tac (the international airport midway between Seattle and Tacoma) in your National Rental Car, you'll only be behind the wheel for some thirty minutes before arriving in the town of University Place, home of Chambers Bay. This public-access stunner served as host venue of this year's U.S. Open, won in thrilling fashion by world number two Jordan Spieth over perpetual Major contender Dustin Johnson.



Chambers Bay

The irony of Chambers Bay is that despite its championship imprimatur, zillion-dollar water views, quirky, links-like bounces and magnificent blowout bunkering, the entire golf course contains a single tree; the lone Fir standing sentinel behind the 15th green. Ironic because Seattle's history is as a logging and timber town, and one of the region's greatest natural resources are the grandeur and prevalence of the hardwood forests.

Chambers Bay garnered negative headlines during the most recent U.S. Open for the compromised condition of the putting surfaces, which led to a chorus of complaints and grumblings from the contestants. Now to be fair, hosting the national championship puts tremendous stress on a course's turf grass, and it has been drought-like conditions virtually all summer throughout the northwest.



Salish Cliffs

Luckily, ideal conditioning in a serene and forested setting are available at the little known but highly recommended Salish Cliffs, just 45 minutes further down the pike in tiny Shelton, Washington. An amenity of the Little Creek Casino Resort, just a few hundred yards away, this exceptional golf course is owned and operated by the Squaxin Island Tribe. Salish Cliffs, despite its relative youth, (it opened in 2011) immediately takes a seat at the table with some of the finest Native American-owned courses in the nation. In the contracting golf economy, where a hundred courses or more are closing annually, one of the few bright spots in the last decade or two has been the proliferation of courses built on tribal lands, and owned and operated by the tribes themselves. Salish Cliffs is on par with rousing facilities such as Mississippi's Dancing Rabbit, Connecticut's Lake of Isles, and Idaho's Circling Raven.



Salish Cliffs

Like Circling Raven, Salish Cliffs was also designed by Gene Bates, who has done a masterful job of integrating the playing fields among 360-degree views of the surrounding Kamilche Valley, impressive rock facings and elevation changes of 600 feet. The course is set amidst lush forestry, is in pristine condition, and offers a wonderful amalgamation of uphill and downhill holes.

Bates throws most everything at the golfer, and it's all good. There's a 15,000 square foot double green (numbers nine and eighteen) drivable par-4s, drop shot, short-iron par-3s, and reachable par-5s. Beyond the strategy, there's a feeling of rusticity and remove through most of the playing corridors, and Salish Cliffs offers a dramatic juxtaposition with Chambers Bay. At the U.S. Open venue a golfer can see pretty much every hole on the property from any point. Salish Cliffs is the opposite. One can only see the hole being played at that moment. The remainder of the course is screened by woods, fescue or the up-and-down nature of the topography.

One round on this gem of a course will leave the adventurous golfer hungry for more, but when real hunger sets in, options abound at the nearby casino hotel. Never mind the typical heat lamp-lit buffets or \$5.00 steak specials that abound in Vegas. The Squaxin Island Tribe are affectionately titled "The People of the Water" and the resort's prime location just outside the South Puget Sound and fresh fish markets of Seattle gains them access to some of the freshest catch in the region. The Squaxin Island Seafood Bar is the place to go for the resort's famous seafood chowder and other delectable dishes.

Thankfully the casino itself isn't overly smoky, but tobacco aficionados will enjoy a post-dinner stroll over to the Skookum Spirit Cigar & Wine Bar. An expert tobacconist can recommend any of a hundred premium cigars. Couple it with a fine scotch on the rocks or locally produced wine, and relax and mentally prepare for the next day's tangle with one of the Northwest's most delightful golf experiences.