

## 'Heavenly Journey' into Northern Michigan

"Focus on the journey, not the destination." That expression was running through my head consistently as I explored the blue highways, picturesque byways, winding back roads and scenic straight-aways, putting 500-plus miles on my rental car on a recent foray to Northern Michigan.



*One of the Beautiful Holes at Crystal Downs*

It was infinite blue sky punctuated by the occasional high-cirrus cloud bank, endless fields of farmland, deep and dark stretches of emerald-green hardwood, miles of glinting lakefront, the occasional farmhouse, roadhouse or craft store. From Traverse City to Frankfort, Big Rapids to Bellaire, Gaylord to Roscommon, all in pursuit of some of the finest summertime golf this nation has to offer.

These blacktop journeys were exhilarating even in my tin can of a compact, this functional (if not quite flashy) Toyota Yaris (rhymes with embarrass). How bracing they might have been in a BMW or Ferrari I cannot imagine. But this being Mighty Michigan, domestic is the more prudent (and patriotic) choice - so I would have been equally fired up in a Dodge Charger or Chevy Corvette. Considering the ideal weather, a Harley "Hog" would have been a blast, but carrying the clubs might prove problematic.

Relying on just two wheels to access the Kingsley Club, in the town of the same name just outside of Traverse City, would be a real balancing act. The mile-long dirt road to the club is strewn with gravel, punctuated by the occasional

grapefruit-sized rock. Kingsley is little-known to the wider golf world, despite having a cadre of national members hailing from 30-plus states. It is an indelible experience for those who like their courses wild, woolly, fescue-framed and unconventional. The near-vertical steepness of the par-5 opening fairway is reminiscent of Fenway Park's "Green Monster," the Boston stadium's famed leftfield wall.



*Immaculate Conditioning is a Hallmark at Forest Dunes*

The green's opening on the par-3 second is little wider than a supermarket aisle, with steep fall-offs on either side into either vegetation or bunkers. The landforms, particularly on the opening nine, are rather extreme in terms of angles and steepness, made up of ridges, valleys and bowls left behind by glacial deposits. It's naturalistic and rough-hewn, with blowout bunkers framed by waving native grasses. The inward nine looks and plays a bit more conventionally, framed by hardwoods, with the elevation changes more subtle than severe. It's a wonderful counterpoint to the heaving nature of the opening side, and the two halves taken as a whole make for one of the region's most compelling golf experiences.

Kingsley Club, designed to play firm and fast, was the first solo design by Mike DeVries, a local resident who previously worked for well-known architects Tom Doak and Tom Fazio, and who had spent time on the grounds crew at famed Crystal Downs in nearby Frankfort. Some folks refer to Kingsley as "Crystal Downs on Steroids," as the architect attempted to pay homage to the Alister Mackenzie-designed "Golden Age" masterpiece an hour-and-change to the west. The well-crafted putting surfaces afford much of the challenge at hand, with

template holes like a Punchbowl and Redan, and numerous other greens with quirky dips, bends and bowls.

Instrumental in the evolution of the Kingsley Club was venerable Crystal Downs head professional Fred Muller, now in his 38th year at the renowned club, currently rated 19th within Golf Magazine's listing of the world's Top 100. Speaking of his fiefdom, where he's been ensconced since Gerald Ford gave way to Jimmy Carter in the White House, Muller states, "It's one of the finest creations of arguably the greatest architect of all time (the aforementioned Mackenzie) working on a beautiful piece of property, at the height of his creative powers, with his construction foreman being Perry Maxwell, who later went on to great acclaim himself as a course architect. The classic clubhouse sits on a 250-foot sand dune overlooking Crystal Lake, with the golf course itself tumbling down the hill away from the property's apex."

Acclaimed golf course architect and native Michigander Doak has been praising the club for decades, and is so fond of the layout he became a member himself. "When I first visited, Crystal Downs was off the radar of the top-100 lists, but I offered my opinion that it was in the same class as the best courses in America." Barely 6,500 yards long, its serene setting, amazing rollercoaster greens, quartet of short-but-strategic (under 360 yards) par-4 holes, abounding fescue and dramatic bunkering combine in a seamless way that makes the golf course an unforgettable experience.

Jason Kempfer has been at Shanty Creek, a full-service resort facility in the town of Bellaire, since 2001, and the head pro at the Tom Weiskopf-designed Cedar River Golf Club since 2003. There are four courses on property, but none more compelling than Cedar River. "This is the most popular of the four, with roomy fairways, plenty of elevation changes and deep stands of massive hardwoods on the periphery.

"Lots of mounding help contain errant drives, and players can run the ball up onto most greens, there aren't many forced carries. If you can make it through the first half-dozen holes intact, you can score well, but the course starts off with a bang." The river itself enters play midway through the back nine, a potentially drivable par-4, and the drop-shot par-3 that follows. It's the most memorable stretch on the course.



*The Seventh Green at Forest Dunes*

Likely the most memorable par-3 golf course most players will ever set eyes upon is the cleverly named Threetops, at Treetops Resort in Gaylord. Built for a billy goat, the terrain changes on this nine-hole curiosity range from 70 to 190 feet, some with severely sloping greens. This correspondent is no ardent fan of par-3 layouts, much preferring to whale away with a driver wherever and whenever possible. But Threetops is an exception, and is an absolute "must-play" at the resort, which boasts an additional 72 holes of full-scale, i.e., driver-friendly golf, in addition to the unique par-3.

Forest Dunes in the tiny burgh of Roscommon is a far-from-common experience, undoubtedly worthy of an overnight visit. The Weiskopf design plays firm and fast, with thoughtful bunkering and a serene locale. The front nine is more of a parkland setting, set through the woods. The back nine is more exposed with numerous sand blowouts, and the conditioning on this housing-free facility is impeccable.

Forest Dunes is the epitome of destination golf; that fact becomes apparent on the miles-long, meandering drive off the county road that takes you to the facility. It's a full five or more minutes of anticipation as you circuitously close in on the 4,500-acre property. The course is top-notch, but so are the handsome and welcoming clubhouse, the bar/restaurant, and well-appointed lodge with 14 rooms, sleeping 26 in total. Add in the half-dozen nearby cottages, and the total capacity for onsite accommodations is just below 70. Once you park the car everything you need for a total golf (and as dusk falls, bocce ball) immersion is within 50 or 100 yards.

Todd Campbell is the club's general manager, and a PGA Member since 1995. He has had a firsthand look at the trials and tribulations of the area's golf economy over the last decade. "The Pure Michigan media campaign has helped us rebound from the financial doldrums from 2008. The problem is too many operators have embraced the discount mentality, and instead of trying to increase market share by improving their product, they offer 'two-for-ones' and all sorts of price-slashing incentives to attract customers. But in my opinion, so much of the golf product here is good enough to stand on its own merit, without giving it away."



*Joel Zuckerman (lower right), next to Fred Muller with his Daughter Gabby Behind*

The affable Michigan native continues, "Fortunately our facility is very unique, and serves as a destination for those both in and out of state. We have 18 wonderful holes, our course conditioning wins raves, and even though one gets that sense of serenity and isolation, we are little more than 15 minutes from I-75, one of the state's major corridors. So we're easy to get to, but once on property, there's no casinos, or shopping, or distractions."

There is also plenty of room for a second course on property and Doak is the architect that's been tapped for the project. If the economy and other circumstances allow him the chance to build it, Forest Dunes will be elevated from a Michigan "must-play" to a destination that discriminating golfers nationwide and beyond will be queuing up to visit.

Whether it eventually doubles to 36 or remains just 18 scintillating holes, Forest Dunes is a classic example of all the great golf experiences in marvelous Northern Michigan.

For more information, visit [www.puremichigan.com](http://www.puremichigan.com).