

## Midwest Golf Fest

To coastal snobs it's long been dismissed as "flyover country." But for ardent golfers, this nation's midsection should be known as "fly-to country," and since late summer this travel-weary correspondent has been chugging to and from the airport with metronomic consistency to prove the point empirically.



*The 10th Hole at Preserve*

Even by the hectic Vagabond Golfer travel schedule on which I pride myself, late August through early October was borderline chaotic. In less than six weeks, I ventured on separate trips to Minnesota, then Wisconsin, followed by Ohio, and finally Kansas. The upshot of this quartet of journeys, aside from a fattened frequent-flyer account and a surfeit of miniature peanut packets that are still rattling around in my golf bag, came a greater appreciation of all the superb golf that exists - public, private and resort - throughout the Midwest and Great Plains. Here's the blow-by-blow. (Just be thankful it's not a shot-by-shot!)



*The 2nd Hole at Deacon*

**Minnesota** had a certain resonance with me, as I was returning to the site of my very first FAM (short for familiarity) trip, or press junket, which took place a decade ago. In the interim between visits I have taken about 60 other trips of a similar nature to destinations all over the map, but my second impression of Minnesota was similar to the first: it is a fantastic, eminently worthwhile destination where the quality, quantity and proximity (particularly in the Brainerd area) of public-access courses is as good as most anything I've seen stateside.

There are more than 450 courses in this Upper Midwest golf Mecca, home to approximately 4.5 million residents. Minnesota has more golfers per capita than any other state in the union, and is the only state to have held all 13 of the different national championships sanctioned by the United States Golf Association (not to mention a number of PGA Championships, including Y.E. Yang's upset of Tiger Woods this past summer at Hazeltine).

There is world-class private golf in and around the Twin Cities, including the aforementioned Hazeltine. Minikahda, White Bear Yacht Club and Interlachen are among the finest courses in the nation's center. But there's also great golf of the public variety just a few hours to the north, in Brainerd Lakes.



*Sun Sets on the River Course at Destination Kohler*

Deacon's Lodge is a staunch Arnold Palmer design, riddled with wetlands, named in honor of the designer's dad. The Preserve at Grand View Lodge is another "must-see," a trifle less intimidating than Deacon's. Also worthwhile is Grand View's The Pines, and the Whitebirch Course at Breezy Point Resort. This quartet is a good starting point, but represents only about 20% of the available golf in Brainerd, all within a 45-minute drive.

For those who prefer to really take their golf show on the road, then the fabled Iron Range, the industrial-mining area in the state's desolate northeast corner, might be worth the three-hour drive from Brainerd. Giant's Ridge, in the town of Biwabik, has a pair of excellent Jeff Brauer designs, called the Legend and the Quarry. The Legend offers 72 strokes (if you're good - really good!) that wander up, over and through some spectacular North Country terrain. Bentgrass fairways, cavernous bunkers, sparkling blue lakes, massive boulders and towering hardwoods provide the challenge and the scenery. The scary 17th hole, a 200-plus-yard par-3 completely over water, is worth the green fee all by itself. But The Legend is the undercard in comparison to The Quarry, which is carved up, through and around reclaimed minelands. The Quarry's hallmarks include dramatically raised tees and deep hazards forged from mine lands, wetlands, forests and a former sand quarry.



*One of the Heart-Racing Holes at Whistling Straits*

Destination Kohler in **Wisconsin** is the only AAA five-diamond resort in the Midwest. I'm not sure how AAA's rating system works, but to my mind Kohler's five diamonds represent the quartet of scintillating Pete Dye-designed golf courses, plus their all-world spa. Whistling Straits is the jaw-dropper, a faux-Irish links set hard by the shores of Lake Michigan, with bunkers scattered - in the words of a witty scribe - like laundry in the aftermath of a tornado. It has the PGA Tour pedigree - host of the '04 PGA Championship, coming again in 2010, once again in 2015 and culminating with the 2020 Ryder Cup. The River Course is the original Dye Design, snug by the Sheboygan River, several times the site of the U.S. Women's Open. Meadow Valleys and the Irish Course round out this most excellent foursome.



*Whistling Straits Along the Shores of Lake Michigan*

My **Ohio** visit was quick and to-the-point. Thirty hours and 36 holes in the Bear's Lair - an overnight stay, two tours of duty at Muirfield Village, and a breakfast meeting with Jack Nicklaus himself. The "Golden Bear" was adamant about improving his hometown creation's status in the eyes of the golf press. It's a worldwide top-40 course already, but his point of view is that it deserves to be ranked higher still - among the top 10, and he spent the better part of an hour explaining why. Though several of my colleagues had been there previously to cover the Memorial Tournament, the prestigious PGA Tour event held every May, surprisingly few had ever played the course. All were impressed with the meticulous conditioning, the expansive driving areas, the clever use of streams and ponds, the nuance and overall quickness of the greens, and the fact that most every tee shot heads pleasingly downhill.



*The Aptly Named River Course at Destination Kohler*

Though the forays to the first, second and third destination were all repeats, I had never before dragged my sticks to **Kansas**. I'm glad I did. Two venues were all I saw, old and new, and if there's better golf action to be found in the nation's epicenter than the 99 holes I was privileged to play in the Sunflower State, I'll have to see it with my own eyes.

I spent 24 hours and 36 holes at a modern beauty called Flint Hills National, the brainchild of Rent-a-Center founder Tom Devlin, who wanted to bring world-class golf to his Wichita home. Working in conjunction with golf architect Tom Fazio, having the taste and foresight to build handsome on-site cabins for lodging and an attractively homey log cabin clubhouse, he succeeded in spectacular fashion. There are no parallel fairways to be found on this capacious, 240-acre property. So coming into contact with other golfers is a rarity, but close proximity to hardwoods (more than 5,000) wildflowers (85 varieties) wetlands (10 acres worth) and ponds (24 acres) are a given.

Nine times out of ten, a jewel like Flint Hills is the "Big Enchilada," the main course of the meal. But this time it was a mere appetizer, or precursor, as Part 2 of the Kansas conquest was spent at one of the world's most revered - and certainly among the most unusual great tests of the game - Prairie Dunes. Wind-addled and fescue-framed, with baffling greens that feature more levels than an airport parking structure, Prairie Dunes is the golf pride of Hutchinson. It's known affectionately as the "Links of the Prairies," and is currently ranked 25th on Golf Magazine's listing of the world's Top 100 Golf Courses. It's a combination Perry-and-Press-Maxwell design, the father laying out the original nine holes in 1937, the son seamlessly adding the addition two decades later.

When Dorothy Gale, the central character in "The Wizard of Oz," uttered her famous remark, she was bewildered, anxious, and full of trepidation. But as it's repeated in closing, my attitude is more wistful, thankful for the indelible experience I was fortunate enough to have, and laced with a slight tinge of regret:

"Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore."  
Here are the course contacts:

Deacon's Lodge: <http://www.grandviewlodge.com/golfcourses.asp>

Breezy Point Resort: <http://www.breezypointresort.com>

Giant's Ridge: [www.giantsridge.com](http://www.giantsridge.com)

Destination Kohler: [www.destinationkohler.com/golf/golf\\_index.html](http://www.destinationkohler.com/golf/golf_index.html)

Muirfield Village: [www.nicklaus.com/design/muirfieldvillage](http://www.nicklaus.com/design/muirfieldvillage)

Flint Hills National: [www.flinthillsnational.com](http://www.flinthillsnational.com)

Prairie Dunes: <http://www.prairiedunes.com>