

RTJ Golf Trail Drives Alabama's Economic Engine

It had been 10 years minimum since my last visit to Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. In the interim, with hundreds of other courses played and hundreds of thousands of air miles flown, I had forgotten how massive in size and scope these wonderful courses are.



The 17th hole at Ross Bridge

It's not immediately evident from the first tee shot at the Trail's newest stop, Ross Bridge, just outside of Birmingham. Truthfully, the shot is a bit awkward, as the starter encourages disbelieving golfers to aim to the right of the fairway bunker, towards the tree line, even though it's plain to see the expanse of fairway grass is left. Anyway, once a player arrives to play their second at this par-5 opener, the scale of the place comes into immediate focus. Greens here are measured in quarter-acres, and bunkers are the size of building foundations, often just as deep.

This is golf for Gulliver, yet it is mostly us Lilliputians who high-tail it to the Trail, reveling in the sheer length and breadth, steepness, deepness, brawny, big-shouldered nature of the terrain. But this story is about something much bigger than the Trail courses, even Ross Bridge, which stretches over 8,000 yards in length.

Bill Lang is the PR director of the RTJ Golf Trail, a position he has held for eight years. The Mississippi native married a girl from Atlanta, so he says jokingly, "We decided to settle halfway between, in Birmingham."

"All of our successes, this amazing Golf Trail, with 468 holes at 11 different sites around the state, stems from a visionary named David Bronner, who moved to Alabama from Minnesota years ago," begins Lang.



The 10th Hole at Ross Bridge

Bronner was a law professor and PhD, who eventually took the reins at the RSA, or Retirement Systems of Alabama, the pension fund for employees of the state. He was struck by the fact that golfers were continuously driving through Alabama to get to Florida, even though the climate was similar and 'Bama's terrain offered far more topographical interest. He earmarked a chunk of the \$500 million then under management to fund the largest single golf-related construction project ever undertaken, simultaneously building courses throughout the state.

"He approached a number of well-known golf course architects," continues Lang, "and it was Robert Trent Jones Sr., who decided to come out of semi-retirement and take on the project." (Much of the design work was handled by Jones' associate Roger Rulewich, who now has his own golf architectural firm.)

The success of the Trail has been staggering, and not just because the 10 millionth visitor will arrive early in 2013. Alabama's tourism business was less than \$2 billion annually prior to the Trail's creation, and now it is in excess of \$10 billion. (Look at it this way: if each of the 10 million visitors paid an average of just \$500 for green fees, lodging, food, transportation, etc., the influx of money has been about \$5 billion. All but the most budget-conscious Trail visitors are probably spending closer to \$1,000 per person with everything factored in, which means the revenues are closer to \$10 billion.)



Oxmoor Valley's Opening Hole

However, the massive revenues owing to the presence of the Trail are only a piece of the puzzle, and a small one at that. Only the most vehement naysayers (or golf-haters) would argue it's mere coincidence that since the Trail's inception, blue-chip companies like Toyota, Mercedes-Benz, Hyundai, Honda, Airbus, Navistar and ThyssenKrupp have all built major manufacturing plants in "The Heart of Dixie."

Just as Rome wasn't built in a day, early on the focus was aimed at the golf experience itself, with little forethought in regards to the lodging component. Visitors made due with chain hotels and motels, nothing too fancy, occasionally on the shabbier side. But Bronner and company realized that to attract the international business community to Alabama, and showcase the beauty of the landscape, friendliness and work ethic of the people, attractive tax rates and large swaths of inexpensive land for potential factories, upper-level executives wouldn't be thrilled with the EconoLodge and Comfort Inns at their disposal.



Ross Bridge Golf Course

"Frankly speaking, we needed to up the ante in terms of our lodging component," continues Lang. "Now we have eight luxury properties from one end of the Trail to the other, including six that are rated Four Diamond. Several were historical properties that have been comprehensively refurbished, and others were built from scratch. But the bottom line is we now have lodging that is commensurate with our golf experience, and that is really saying something."

For example, the very modern Marriott Shoals in Florence, in the northwest corner of the state, was rated the chain's top hotel for customer satisfaction. But down in the southwest corner in Mobile, close to the Gulf of Mexico, a refurbished hotel from 1852 called the Battle House sufficiently charmed executives visiting from Airbus to the point that they are planning to open a manufacturing plant nearby. (Of course, \$158 million in financial incentives and logistical support also helped sway them.)



Oxmoor Valley's Valley Course

Few properties on the Trail are as impressive as Ross Bridge Resort on the outskirts of Birmingham, and its impact on the community is a microcosm for what's occurred statewide. Modeled loosely after the famed Banff Springs Resort west of Calgary, Canada, Ross Bridge is an imposing edifice containing 259 guest rooms and a 12,000-square-foot spa, and is considered by Travel + Leisure Magazine to be among the "Top 500 Hotels in the World." The on-site eateries, both fine dining (Brock's) and casual (Clubhouse Restaurant), are superb, with first-class service. A bagpiper strolls the grounds each evening, adding even more ambience to this handsome hotel, snuggled close to the expansive golf course just steps from the patio and pool area.

The hotel is located in a once wide-spot-in-the-road town called Hoover, which a generation ago closely resembled Hooterville, the fictional town in the TV comedy classic "Green Acres." While the rural sensibility still exists, the fact is that an entire upscale subdivision has sprung up, in part due to Ross Bridge, and its close-at-hand Trail neighbor, Oxmoor Valley, 54 more holes of compelling golf just five minutes down the road.



Ross Bridge - No. 9 with Piper

"It's symbolic that one of the original Trail facilities are the three courses at Oxmoor, and Ross Bridge is currently the newest Trail member," notes Lang. One might think with 72 fine golf holes within the same neighborhood, golf would be the unquestioned king of recreation. But with a Porsche Driving School just a short distance away, the fact is that many visitors to Ross Bridge Resort are car aficionados. The drivers they obsess over are Formula One and Indy Car, not Ping, Taylor-Made or Callaway.

"We get Hollywood personalities, Wall Street power-brokers and other high-profile individuals here at the hotel on a regular basis. Some are also interested in golf, but many are just here to improve their driving skills, with no interest in the game," states Lang. One can only surmise that with this community's agrarian roots, John Deere outsold Porsche by a factor of a hundred to one before the area morphed into the upscale golf (and driving) getaway it has become.



The 16th Green at Oxmoor Valley's Valley Course

There's no way of accurately quantifying the enormous economic and social impact of the Trail throughout the state. Another microcosm will have to suffice. Prior to Capitol Ridge opening up in central Alabama near Montgomery, the town of Prattville, according to Lang, was just another wide spot in the road, with a couple of cow pastures. "First it was 54 holes of great golf, then a Hyundai plant opened close to town, and now there are hotels, shopping centers, restaurants, the town hosts an LPGA event, and it has become a much more vibrant and thriving community. It's safe to say that without the advent of the Trail, Prattville would be the same tiny, sleepy little town it had always been."

From Prattville to Birmingham, Anniston to Auburn, Huntsville to Greenville to Dothan, the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail has resulted in huge swaths of underutilized acreage repurposed into these marvelous playing fields. But the transformation of fallow land into greenswards, impressive as that has been, only scratches the surface of the magnificent transformation of Alabama's economic landscape that continues to this day.