

GOLF ODYSSEY

April 2017 – Our 26th Year

THE INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE BEST IN GOLF TRAVEL

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Sand Valley

Our First Look, Plus a Bucket List Subscriber Opportunity



SAND VALLEY GOLF RESORT / RYAN FARROW

Coore-Crenshaw's eponymous Sand Valley design is the resort's original eighteen

If you're an avid golf traveler, you probably regard Mike Keiser with the same admiration New England Patriots fans feel for Tom Brady and Bill Belichick. We certainly do. A Chicago-based greeting card magnate by trade, Keiser's foray into golf development began with the quiet, back-to-golf-basics Dunes Club in New Buffalo, Michigan, whose design, which reminds us of the great Pine Valley, is one of the best nine-hole golf courses in the world.

The Dunes Club being private, the greater golfing public took little notice of Keiser until the 1999 opening of Bandon Dunes on Oregon's remote southern Pacific coast. Naysayers acknowledged the merits of David McLay Kidd's design, but dismissed the place as a curiosity that was so difficult to get to that few but the most determined would go to the trouble to see it. Four more

golf courses later, Bandon Dunes Golf Resort is a pilgrimage site for all golfers, especially those who yearn for the sorts of links layouts on which the game was first played.

Fast forward a decade, and Keiser's sphere of influence on the travel schedules of golfers doubled in size with the opening of the Rod Whitman-designed Cabot Links on the western coast of Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island, which he developed along with Ben Cowan-Dewar, a Canadian golf tour operator-turned hotelier. In a similar mold as the Bandon courses, Cabot Links echoes the game's ancient seaside venues. Following Keiser's adage that "One course is a curiosity, but two courses is a destination," a Coore-Crenshaw companion course, Cabot Cliffs, opened last year to universal acclaim. It is simply one of the best two dozen golf courses on the planet, its

cliffside holes rivaling for spectacular scenery anything in the golfing world.

With Bandon Dunes continuing to add amenities (the sublime Punchbowl putting course and the Bandon Preserve par-three course, to name two) and Cabot Links ramping up, Keiser wasn't exactly in hot pursuit of a third location on which to apply his sand-based, average-golfer-oriented resort development philosophy. But thanks in part to Craig Haltom, a golf course construction executive and fellow native Midwesterner who "discovered" the property, the golf world now turns its attention to a third Keiser venture: Sand Valley, in Rome, Wisconsin.

When savvy golfers think "Wisconsin" and "sand," the immediate image conjured is Pete Dye's Whistling Straits and its thousand-odd bunkers that seem to spill down into Lake Michigan (2017 U.S. Open site Erin Hills runs a sensible second). Sand Valley, nearly three hours west of Kohler, is situated on a landscape reminiscent of the North Carolina Sandhills, but with even more abrupt and dramatic dunes, forged by the movement of glaciers eons ago. Kaiser fell for the property so deeply that in order to build Sand Valley, he set aside one of his main site criteria: the presence of an ocean or large body of water.

To stand at the foot of Craig's Porch (a nod to Haltom's influence), the modest snack bar set on high ground just feet from the first and tenth tees, the golfer does not remotely lament his or her position hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean. The open expanse of sand, small native jack pines and Coore-Crenshaw golf course that unfolds from the complex is as inspiring an inland tableau as one could wish for.

The excitement of launching the day's first tee shot across a valley and onto the fairway is intense, and the opening hole sets a perfect tone for the course to come. The landing area is very wide, such that the player looking to simply get off the tee can lay safely back and to the right, while the more aggressive player can challenge the sandy wastes on the left and, with a good swing, be rewarded with a pitch into the large green, with a significant false front and upper tier.

More risk-reward propositions come and go at Sand Valley, with the front nine concluding on perhaps the most enticing of them all. The 9th is a downhill, drivable par four with another elevated, two-tiered green protected in front by bunkers, with a narrow gap between. Longer hitters may be able to challenge the green with as little as a three wood, while the more conservative player could



The sandy, exposed terrain lends itself to the links-style game Mike Keiser loves

practically throw a ball from the tee area and let it bound down the hill and into the friendly fairway, within short-iron range of the green.

The back nine contains somewhat more mystery than the front, glossy photographs of which you may have already seen in magazines. During our mid-August visit, we were fortunate enough to have been invited to play not just the loop of holes 10 and 16 through 18 that had been open for preview play during most of 2016, but the rest of the inward half as well. This final piece of the puzzle contained our second-favorite hole at Sand Valley, the short par-five 12th, a rare two-fairway hole that works beautifully from a strategic standpoint. The "main" fairway snakes along to the right of two tall lone pines before meandering back left, and is perfect for the player who wants a near-guaranteed fairway lie and doesn't mind making the hole a three-shotter. The slightly obscured left-hand fairway requires a carry over sand



Mammoth Dunes, a David McLay Kidd design, will feature large sand hills

and scrub, but the reward is as little as a long-iron into the green, and a real chance for an easy birdie or an eagle.

Our favorite hole at Sand Valley is the penultimate test: a long par three where the free-form tee area wanders back to as far as 260 yards from the center of the green. That putting surface is of the “Punchbowl” variety, with all manner of complicating slopes that, depending on the day’s hole location, can be used to maneuver the ball close to the hole. Sand Valley’s firm and fast conditions allow for the inimitable experience of hitting a low, running shot and watching the ball disappear into the bowl, followed by the walk up and over the rise and the discovery of the outcome of the shot.



The spacious rooms in Sand Valley's Leopold Cottages are bright and comfortable

After one last climb up the hill with the reachable par-five 18th, there's one question in the golfer's mind: *How soon can I do this again?* In the same tradition as other great golf courses, Sand Valley's first course is one that merits multiple plays during a visit. The subtleties of the large greens and the intricate strategic facets of the playing field won't be easily deciphered on the first or even second go-round, and the “correct” way to play a hole may change significantly depending on the day's tee and hole locations.

(Note: Sand Valley is a walking-only facility. Both Coore-Crenshaw and Kidd have taken special care to tie tee areas in beautifully to previous greens, making the transition from one hole to the next effortless in most cases. The resort has an experienced and growing corps of caddies, though a caddie is not required. Visitors may carry their own bags or use a trolley. Our advice for the latter set: take special care where you guide your trolley, lest it get mired in a soft patch of sand.)

The first course has Sand Valley off to a roaring start, but the second layout, Mammoth Dunes, designed by David McLay Kidd, will bring the resort from “curiosity” to “destination” status in a hurry once it opens for preview play in late 2018 (a six-hole preview loop will be available to guests in 2017). We received a full tour of Kidd's layout during our August visit and were startled by its palpably different feel from Coore-Crenshaw's creation, despite some holes of both courses being adjacent to one another. Whereas the resort's original eighteen enjoys an open, almost prairie-like feel, Kidd's routing plays through both pine and oak forest, although the corridors will be wide enough that the course will never feel tight. The elevation changes on Mammoth Dunes are bigger and broader as well, although the course will begin and end on some of the property's tamer terrain. Adding intrigue to this part of Kidd's layout will be a gargantuan area of exposed sand, which will dictate much of the play on holes 1, 2, 16, 17 and 18. Those who have encountered Hell's Half Acre in Pine Valley or its many descendants will note that this hazard dwarfs its ancestor.

Sand Valley's various lodging offerings have been designed to suit the needs of any group of golfers. When we visited in August, we were the first to stay in one of the spacious, well-appointed *Lake Leopold Cottages*, which overlook a pond and the thrilling short par-four 9th on the Coore-Crenshaw course. The cottages, the first accommodations built at Sand Valley, are ideal for groups of four or eight golfers, as they consist of four rooms arranged around a central common room. Just steps down a hill from the cottages sit the aforementioned swimming pond and a number of fire pits.

By the time Sand Valley reopens this May, two more lodging options will be available. The main clubhouse will feature options for one-, two- or four-person parties, with suite accommodations available as well. Finally, the Fairway Lodge, tucked into a dune off to the left of the 18th hole at the Coore-Crenshaw course, houses rooms with two queen beds.

Dining options at Sand Valley will grow in step with the infrastructure of the resort. Back in August, Craig's Porch was the only eatery. Though somewhat austere, it covers all bases well: excellent breakfast sandwiches, a choice of Italian beef sandwiches or local bratwursts at lunch, and sublime ice cream sandwiches in a dozen different flavors. The main restaurant will be housed in the clubhouse, and its preliminary menu will lean heavily on local and regional ingredients. Expect a house-made bratwurst on the lunch menu, as well as a burger using locally-raised bison. A pretzel-crusting pheasant breast is a highlight on the dinner menu. And as a nod to the current age of crowdsourcing, there is a space within the dining section of Sand Valley's website soliciting suggestions for additional menu items from the public.

Apart from its inland setting, Sand Valley is different from Mike Keiser's other properties because it is a four-season resort. At Bandon and Cabot, golf is the chief draw. At Sand Valley, golf will still be the main activity, but Central Wisconsin's playing season is rather short. During the cold and snowy winters,

Sand Valley's overseers plan to offer snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and other outdoor winter pursuits to ensure maximum utilization of this outstanding resort property. Even in the warmer months, tennis and fishing will complement the golf. But make no mistake—Sand Valley is first and foremost a golf resort, with four or even five layouts in the long-range plans.

Indeed, additional golf is already on its way in the form of a 30-acre, 20-hole short course taking shape alongside Sand Valley's practice facility. Located near the clubhouse and down the hill from Craig's Porch and the 1st and 10th tees of Course #1, the short course will feature yet more Coore-Crenshaw design brilliance. Mike Keiser is expected to name an architect for the third regulation eighteen in the coming months, and it is expected to break ground shortly after Mammoth Dunes is finished. Mike DeVries, Tom Doak, and Coore-Crenshaw are on the shortlist for that commission.

Finally, a word about Sand Valley's remote location. The airports at Milwaukee (MKE) and Minneapolis/St. Paul (MSP) are both less than three and a half hours from the resort, and four regional airports – Central Wisconsin (CWA), Madison (MSN), Appleton (ATW) and Green Bay (GRB) – are all two hours or less away.

Private flyers can utilize in Alexander Field South Wood County Airport, in Wisconsin Rapids, which is just 25 minutes from the resort.

Sand Valley Golf Resort

sandvalleygolfresort.com; 888-651-5539

SAND VALLEY GOLF RESORT/RYAN FARROW



Holes on Sand Valley present players with strategic options

A SPECIAL OPPORTUNITY FOR *GOLF ODYSSEY* READERS

Sand Valley promises to be America's next great inland golf mecca. We were so impressed with our preview visit that we made immediate plans to return, and we'd like you to join us.

This summer, the editors of *GOLF ODYSSEY* and our sister publication, *GOLF VACATION INSIDER*, will be leading a group of avid golfers back to Wisconsin to get intimately acquainted with this exciting new resort.

This group, limited to just 40 players, will have the opportunity to experience Sand Valley in exclusive fashion. Not only will we play multiple rounds on the maturing, original Coore-Crenshaw layout, we will have the opportunity to preview David Kidd's Mammoth Dunes by playing a six-hole loop and getting an inside look at the rest of the layout. In addition, a few special guests will be on hand to provide unique insight into the history, development, and future of the property. The identities of these guests will be revealed in the coming months. You can be sure they will help introduce you to Sand Valley with a level of detail that the ordinary guest is simply unable to experience. All students of golf course architecture and development should consider this a bucket-list opportunity.

Here is the itinerary for the event:

Monday, July 17, 2017

Arrive at Sand Valley Resort and settle into your accommodations. Tee times will be available should you wish to play the golf course on your own. The official festivities commence with a cocktail reception (4 to 6 p.m.) hosted

by the editors of *GOLF ODYSSEY* and *GOLF VACATION INSIDER* and officials of Sand Valley.

Tuesday, July 18, 2017

The golf kicks off with a morning round on Sand Valley, the resort's original eighteen designed by Bill Coore & Ben Crenshaw. After lunch, we will gather to play a six-hole loop on Mammoth Dunes, to be followed by a full tour of this David McLay Kidd creation. We will be some of the first golfers to experience this new layout. Later, we will convene for a group dinner and a discussion with our distinguished guests, who will provide commentary about the Sand Valley vision.

Wednesday, July 19, 2017

You will play a final round on Sand Valley's original eighteen in the morning before departing the resort.

The cost for this exclusive *GOLF ODYSSEY* subscriber's insider immersion experience at Sand Valley is \$1,395 per person based on double occupancy (\$1,795 single occupancy). Note that in addition to the lodging, golf, and activities described above, the package price also includes caddie fees. Caddies are optional and the recommended gratuity, to be paid in cash to the caddie, is \$70-\$90 per bag, based upon the level of caddie.

For inquiries and to secure your spot, email us at travel@golfodyssey.com or contact ??? at 800-550-2286 x ???.

Monarch Beach Resort

The Scoop on a Social Remake

In the February issue of *GOLF ODYSSEY*, we showcased The Resort at Pelican Hill. This month, we travel 12 miles down the coast to Dana Point and the Monarch Beach Resort. Last June, the hotel, which boasts a private beach club and an eighteen-hole Robert Trent Jones II-designed golf course, pulled down the St. Regis flag it had flown since its debut in 2001. Since acquiring this luxurious Orange County retreat back in 2014, KSL Capital Partners, owners of the Hotel Coronado in San Diego and Miraval Resort & Spa in Tucson (and former owners of Squaw Valley, La Quinta, and La Costa), has spent lavishly to take the property to a higher level. The switch to independent status occurred just as this five-star and *Golf Magazine* Gold Medal-winning resort put the finishing touches on a purported \$40-million renovation project. Our curiosity got the better of us, and we took the resort for a test run in December just after we visited Pelican Hill.

Monarch Beach Resort commands land that was once fertile breeding ground for the monarch butterfly, though alas, the large houses built into the hillsides and bluffs have pushed the butterflies away. Monarch Beach Golf Links rambles between those houses, the hotel, and the beach. Accomplished players will doubtless prefer the longer and more expansive and challenging layouts down the road at Pelican Hill, but this sporty test, which at one point touches the beach, can be a fun diversion for players of all levels. A laid back ambience prevails at the club. On any given day, you'll be likely to see a few players "surfing the earth" as they zip around with their clubs on GolfBoards (see *GOLF ODYSSEY*, March 2016). If you don't have the time or inclination to play a full eighteen (or even nine), no problem—the club recently began offering a five-hole loop in the afternoon that includes the ocean holes.

Golf is just one of the many lures of the Monarch Beach Resort. The recent addition of the Miraval Life in Balance Spa, a branch of the renowned Miraval Resort & Spa in Tucson, lends star appeal for spa goers. Our dinner at the resort's Stonehill Tavern, a Michael Mina restaurant, was one of the best we've had in Southern California. Those who enjoy tennis will welcome access to complimentary court time across the street at the Tennis Club at Monarch Beach.

We visited in early December when we thought the resort would be rather quiet. Instead, the hotel, a popular "staycation"



Monarch Beach Resort has been reenergized by its recent makeover

retreat for Los Angeles residents, was teeming with people. The "Reimagining Project" certainly has reenergized the property. Besides the Miraval Spa, additional new features include a more welcoming guest registration experience; a brighter, more open and inviting lobby; a transformed pool complex with separate areas for adults and children; completely refurbished guestrooms; and new or refreshed in-house dining venues.

We should mention one caveat, especially if you are coming for the sand and surf: the resort's very nice beach is actually a good mile from the hotel. If you walk from the hotel, be sure to stay alert, because you must pass within range of errant golf balls. We would advise taking the resort tram instead, which is about a 15-minute ride.

Editor's Note: Monarch Beach Resort is midway between Los Angeles and San Diego. Four commercial airports offer viable flight options: LAX (60 miles from the resort); San Diego International Airport (SAN, 70 miles); John Wayne Orange County Airport (SNA, 22 miles); and Long Beach Airport (LGB, 41 miles).



Monarch Beach Golf Links (Rating: B-), a 30-year-old Robert Trent Jones II design, is one of California's few oceanside courses. Though lower handicappers will take dead aim on this short and compact par-70 test that tops out at 6,645 yards, it is not easy (135 slope rating from the tips). More often than not you will be better off leaving the cover on your driver as you navigate the routing's narrow fairways, 110 bunkers, numerous

brush-filled ravines, and looming OB stakes. Aerial entry with spin is often required to hold the small, elevated, and undulating putting surfaces and avoid the abundant brilliant white sand pits. The greens were rolling at 11 the day we played, but they are often even faster.

The par-36 front nine, which features a couple of severe doglegs and blind or semi-blind shots, plays about 500 yards longer than the back nine. Excitement levels crest early, for after the 2nd hole, a sign at the entrance to a tunnel denotes the “Ocean Holes.” The tee boxes on the signature, short (258 to 315 yards) dogleg-left 3rd point straight out toward the ocean before the fairway bends with the precipice line of the bluff. Most players should hit a layup drive rather than challenge the bunkers at the crook of the dogleg. The center of the fairway is a perfect spot for admiring the view and from which to approach the tilted two-tiered green that falls off precariously at the edges.



Monarch Beach Golf Links' par-four 3rd hole traces the beachfront

The second “ocean hole”, the one-shot 4th, actually leads directly away from the sea. This is the last time you will be near the shoreline at Monarch Beach, though the sea pops into view occasionally later in the round. The rest of the way the routing works its way around a number of ponds and lakes and environmentally sensitive areas. Brush-filled ravines and wetlands flank or cross several fairways. Most notably, the no. 1 handicap par-five 7th, a 612-yard monster, features a Cape-style tee shot and requires two carries over the imposing left-side hazard that eventually crosses in front of the green.

Monarch Beach Golf Links encourages walking. Though the layout has a few hills, none are severe. Be advised that in addition to the five par threes, the course typically designates two holes on each nine as cart-path only. One advantage of taking a cart is that you will have the benefit of GPS.

We encountered poor turf conditions during our December visit. In addition to some bare spots on the greens, numerous sections of fairway were either chalked—or roped-off because the grass coverage was sparse. Thankfully, the rainstorms that besieged Southern California this winter have helped replenish the turf. In an effort to ensure conditions are better this summer, the club did not overseed. Instead, under the direction of a new superintendent recruited from Riviera Country Club, Monarch Beach is converting its fairways to all Bermuda grass this season. The club says that grass coverage is back up to 95 percent.

The clubhouse is within walking distance of the hotel, though you can also catch the tram that departs from the front of the hotel every 15 minutes. Friendly staffers will welcome you in the golf shop, where you will find a daily batch of fresh-baked cookies. Club 19 restaurant, a nice spot for lunch, has an outdoor terrace. Practice facilities are limited to the adjacent putting green and a warm-up net at the edge of the parking lot.

When Monarch Beach is busy, the experience on this compact layout can be a little dizzying. In addition to the close proximity

of greens and tees, exposed, largely treeless fairways frequently parallel each other. On a few occasions players from other groups were hitting their balls from our fairway. Others were riding the wavy terrain on GolfBoards. Meanwhile, you may also encounter hotel guests walking through the grounds on their way to the beach club. The resort trams (elongated, enclosed multi-seat golf cart vehicles) also speed through and occasionally come into the line of fire. Whether you choose to walk or take a cart when you are playing, you will pass through some small tunnels and over a few bridges. The signage isn't always great. When we reached the ocean holes, we turned left instead of right and wound up driving on the pedestrian walkway that leads to the beachfront.



The re-energized, seven-story, horseshoe-shaped **Monarch Beach Resort (Rating: A)** now showcases an expanded entrance hall, lobby, and lounge that looks out on a glorious new pool complex, the golf course, and the ocean. By switching to lighter and brighter decor, the property is trying to replace its former corporate feel with a more leisurely and inviting California coastal ambience. That said, the presence of large groups of guests wearing suits and name tags suggests that the property still holds plenty of appeal to meeting planners.

All of the guestrooms received a complete floor-to-ceiling makeover. Each of the spacious and comfortable chambers exude a California vibe and feature a private patio or terrace, one king or two queen beds with adjustable headboard reading lamps, and an oversized bathroom with a deep soaking tub, glassed-in shower, and dual vanities.

Editor's Tip: The vast majority of rooms in the horseshoe-shaped hotel face the resort grounds. While only four end rooms on each wing boast direct ocean views, chambers near the end of the south side wing also provide views of the sea.

We were impressed by the resort staff. The bellmen and concierge go beyond the call of duty. Before we arrived, the resort's "experience planners" provided excellent service when we made our reservation and set up our golf, activity, and dining itineraries. To get the most bang for your buck at this high-end property (room rates start at \$600 per night), we highly recommend consulting with an experience planner.

Note that additional fees add up fast. The \$35 nightly resort provides Wi-Fi as well as access to the beach club, pool complex, fitness center, and tennis club across the street. Parking costs \$40 per night for valet and \$31 for self-parking.

RESTAURANTS

Monarch Beach (Dining Rating: B+) has a number of attractive dining options. Michael Mina's **Stonehill Tavern** is the highlight, but it is only open from Wednesday through Sunday. It's a popular place, and despite having a reservation, we waited 45 minutes for a table. We couldn't decide which was better—the *Lobster Pot Pie* or the *Morro Bay Black Cod* served with shiro miso, rock shrimp, bok choy, hon shimeji mushrooms, satsuki brown rice, and lemon grass dashi. A sommelier is on hand to help you make the perfect selection from the tavern's 500 varietals of wine.

The **Monarch Bay Club**, a casual restaurant located at the beach, is exclusively for resort guests. The menu showcases fresh seafood, but when we ordered the house favorite fish tacos, they tasted fishy. A far better choice proved to be the swordfish sandwich.

Aveo Table + Bar now has an expanded outdoor terrace to go with its bright interior and huge picture windows. Aveo serves Mediterranean and casual California cuisine for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. **33 North Lounge** in the lobby is a comfortable space for small plates, cocktails, or afternoon "By the Sea Tea" service. You can choose between three distinct sections: the sleek bar, cozy lounge, and the outdoor patio. **Club 19**, a gastropub at the golf course, is a lunch option. The Poolside Cantina is also open seasonally.

Our favorite restaurant off-property in Dana Point is **Two Left Forks**, located on the Pacific Coast Highway. Table settings come with two forks tucked into a red velvet napkin. You won't go wrong with the Seafood Paella or local halibut.

NON-GOLF ACTIVITIES

At the Miraval Life in Balance Spa, many of the treatments have been brought from the Miraval in Tucson, while others utilize coastal ingredients such as sea salt, algae, and marine muds. Monarch Beach also has a nice fitness center. For tennis across the street, the resort concierge can set you up with racquets and balls.

The beach, accessible by resort tram or a 15-minute walk, is popular with guests and surfers; you will find everything you need at the resort's private beach club. The resort's new centerpiece pool complex features an adults-only pool, two infinity-edge spa pools, a family pool with a splash area, and an enhanced kid's pool.

Dana Point, a popular spot for shopping, gallery hopping, and dining, is five minutes from the resort; the resort will even take you there in its courtesy car. Check with the concierge for whale watching expeditions. Excursions generally last 3-4 hours and have a 90 percent success rate at spotting whales or dolphins.

Monarch Beach Resort/Monarch Beach Golf Links
monarchbeachresort.com, 949-234-3900; monarchbeachgolf.com, 949-240-8247

400 rooms and suites from \$xxx to \$x,xxx.

Green fee: \$150 to \$249.

Aerification: late February, mid-April, and late October.

MONARCH BEACH RESORT/MONARCH BEACH GOLF LINKS



Robert Trent Jones II's layout is short and sporty

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Lexington, Kentucky

Golf In and Around America's Horse Capital

Early next month, Churchill Downs will be the stage for the 143rd running of the Kentucky Derby—"The Most Exciting Two Minutes in Sports." Though the race occurs in Louisville, the dreams typically start about 70 miles to the east in Lexington. Known as the "Horse Capital of the World," Lexington is the epicenter of the thoroughbred industry and boasts the largest concentration of horse farms on the planet. Amidst the region's expansive rolling grasslands, it's not surprising the thoughts of many visitors turn to golf. Lexington is home to a Marriott golf resort and numerous daily fee layouts. Last summer we coupled these courses with attractions ranging from horse farms to museums, tours of distilleries on Kentucky's famed Bourbon Trail, and a few enticing restaurants during a memorable and quite inexpensive long weekend excursion.

We led off our Lexington golf lineup with a round at the Griffin Gate Golf Club, a Rees Jones design that underwent a significant renovation in 2015. Our dance card also included the city-owned Kearny Hills Golf Links, Big Blue at the University Club of Kentucky, and a hilly track out in the suburbs—Boone's Trace National. While none of these courses is US top-100 material, most rank in Kentucky's top 25. Keep in mind that Valhalla Golf Club, the private course owned by the PGA of America and the host venue for numerous major competitions, is also just an hour from Lexington. While private, typically all it takes to play Valhalla is a call to your local PGA pro (see *GOLF ODYSSEY*, September 2016).

We established two base camps in Lexington. For those who like to stay where they play, the choice lodging option is the Griffin Gate Marriott Resort. Those who prefer to be immersed in the city should consider the Gratz Park Inn. This boutique hotel offers cozy accommodations and fine dining, and it's ideally situated for exploring Lexington's historic downtown.

Lexington moves to the rhythms of the horse season. Visitors arrive in numbers beginning in mid-March, as the horse shows kick off and the excitement builds for thoroughbred racing. Outside of Churchill Downs, the largest Kentucky Derby party occurs on the first Saturday in May at Lexington's historic Keeneland Race Course, where you can enjoy the Derby on a giant screen from a comfortable seat (something most of the actual Derby attendees won't have). Summer is Lexington's busiest season, as the town fills up with horse people who come for the shows and competitions held every day at the Kentucky Horse Park. While the summer months are hot, cool plateau breezes have a moderating effect at

GRIFFIN GATE MARRIOTT RESORT



Horses aren't alone in loving Lexington's rolling fields of bluegrass

night and prevent the heat from getting too oppressive. The most idyllic time for golf is generally May and June and early autumn.

If you are flying to town, Lexington's Blue Grass Airport (LEX) is conveniently situated about 15 minutes from both the Griffin Gate Marriott and the Gratz Park Inn. Louisville International Airport (SDF) is about 75 minutes away.



Griffin Gate Golf Club (Rating: B), a 1981 Rees Jones design, is the Marriott's Resort's headline attraction. This short, generally flat, and highly playable par-72 layout starts in back of the hotel and winds through a residential development on the back nine. Griffin Gate hosted a Champions Tour event from 1983 until 1989; notable winners included Lee Elder, Gene Littler, and Bob Charles.

This par-72 test stretches from 5,053 to 6,784 yards. While it's fairly formidable from the tips (133 slope), it's very manageable at either 5,786 or 6,196 yards. The first four holes alternate between par fives and par threes. We especially like the 3rd, a dogleg par five that moves to the left around trees and a bunker before a final approach over a moat-like creek to a green backdropped by the hotel.

Griffin Gate benefited from a major renovation project in 2015 that increased playability, enhanced the course's aesthetics, and addressed persistent maintenance problems. Rees Jones' team started by drastically reducing the number and size of the bunkers and adding numerous naturalized areas. This significantly improved drainage while also effectively widening the fairways.

Jones' team also strove to better define the playing corridors and establish clear angles to the greens. With the introduction of closely mown green surrounds, players now also have more opportunities to show their short game creativity.

We were quite impressed by the glistening turf and pristine conditions during our early morning round. The excellent bentgrass greens rolled moderately fast, though our putts consistently broke less than we expected.

The pace of play is generally close to 4.5 hours and can be plodding when it's busy (typically Thursday through Sunday). Carts are mandatory, as the playing field becomes more expansive on the back nine. Although Griffin Gate does not have a course guide or GPS, it does have an app. The app can come in handy, because you can't see some of the hazards from the tee on several holes. Practice facilities are limited to a putting green and a warm-up cage. You can get some basic food items at the snack bar in the clubhouse; most players grab-and-go, but there are a few tables inside and out on the patio. For more substantial fare, head to the hotel.

Kearney Hills Golf Links (Rating: B+), a city-owned, links-style layout with exceptionally wide fairways and gargantuan greens, is a Pete Dye/P.B. Dye collaboration from 1989. When the Champions Tour left Griffin Gate, it moved to this muni for an eight-year run (1990-1997). Gary Player won twice here. Kearney Hills also hosted both the Men's and Women's Pub Links Championships. The course, which features bent grass tees, fairways and greens, is delightfully free of course-side housing. You will find an abundance of sand traps and mounds defending the greens. Water, in the form of two lakes and a pond, factors into play on just a handful of holes, but beware the abundant thick rough that will close your clubface instantly. When the wind blows, Kearney Hills can be extremely difficult. Finally, if you find yourself on the opposite end of one of these greens, good luck avoiding a three-putt (or worse).

Reservations may be made up to a week in advance, but be advised that local seniors take advantage of the low rates every morning and outings frequently fill out the tee sheets. We timed our afternoon visit just after a shotgun event ended and completed our round in a brisk three hours.

Kearney Hills' ample practice facilities include a full driving range, two putting greens, and two chipping areas with bunkers. Though an air of faded glory hangs over Kearney Hills, this links-style playing field is unique in the area and well worth your time.

The University Club of Kentucky has two Arthur Hills-designed eighteens. While the Wildcat Course is a rather uneventful,



The Griffin Gate Marriott backdrops Rees Jones' recently renovated layout

tight, and tree-lined traditional layout, the broad-shouldered, more exposed **Big Blue (Rating: B)** eighteen presents a strong test. Five sets of tees give everyone a fighting chance. Although a few too many fairways on the front nine play opposite each other, the most memorable hole on the home course of the University of Kentucky men's and women's golf teams is the island-green par-three 8th. The green is small and there's nary a bunker to save your ball when it veers anywhere toward the edge of the putting surface.

Water figures prominently on Big Blue's back nine, which presents players with a number of intriguing challenges. The par-three 12th is all carry to an elongated, angled green. You will have to hit a couple of more heroic shots over lakes on the holes coming home. Be sure to pick up a course guide in the clubhouse so you aren't caught off guard by hidden trouble and the size of the putting surfaces.

Boone's Trace National Golf Club (Rating: B) is located within a residential development in Richmond, not quite a half hour from downtown Lexington. In contrast to the courses in the city, Boone's Trace rambles over steep, rolling terrain. At times, especially on the front nine, you will find houses and OB on both sides of the fairways. While you could do damage to property on a couple of holes, the houses are generally well removed from the action on this expansive layout.

Following a humdrum start with a par five and a par four that comes back in the opposite direction, the routing crosses a road and hits its stride. Boone's Trace offers a nice mix of uphill and downhill and short and long tests. The routing constantly changes direction, so you must be mindful of the wind when making your club selection. You can also count on some awkward stances and blind shots. The greens have lots of undulation and get very quick. Practice facilities include a two-tiered grass driving range, putting green and short game area and the clubhouse dining room is a hangout for local residents.

Editor's Note: *Old Silo* (Rating: C-), which occupies an old dairy farm, is still listed in other publications as one of Kentucky's finest eighteens, but the course has come upon hard times and we can't recommend the 40-minute drive from Lexington to play it. A few years ago a tornado ravaged the layout, which was built and originally owned by Graham Marsh, and it has never fully recovered. Most notably, all of the brilliant white sand blew out of the large, deep sand traps and it hasn't been replaced. That's a shame, because Marsh himself told us how much he liked the course, his first design on US soil. The playing field is lush and dramatic, with steep hills and dipping valleys, and the namesake silo comes into play on the par-four 16th hole. Beyond the fairways, overgrown vegetation instantly consumes stray balls. oldsilo.com.



Kearney Hills, a Pete and P.B. Dye collaboration, is very tough in the wind

LODGING

Griffin Gate Marriott Resort & Golf Club (Rating: B+) is conveniently located just off I-75, some 10 minutes from Kearney Hills Golf Links and the Kentucky Horse Park and just 15 minutes from downtown Lexington. The golf club is right beside the hotel. Though the property is dated and could use a makeover, it has an attractive lobby, indoor and outdoor pools, a spa exercise room, and a cocktail lounge and restaurant. Plenty of leisure guests come for Lexington's horse attractions and the Kentucky Bourbon Trail, but Griffin Gate's look and feel is of a business hotel. The decorative style will be familiar to those who frequent Marriott properties. While there's no resort fee, guests must pay for Internet access (\$7). Self-parking is free but valet service costs \$20 per night.

The **Gratz Park Inn** (Rating: A-) is the only boutique hotel in Lexington's historic district. The three-story brick inn occupies a 100-year old building that at one time served as a medical clinic and a morgue. Not surprisingly, the inn is widely believed to be haunted. The Inn has plenty of off-street parking and is ideally located just a short walk from downtown shops, boutiques, and restaurants.

The Inn may not be luxurious, but it is comfortable and full of character. Gratz Park's owners selected all the antiques, furnishings, and wall hangings. The lobby has a baby grand piano and the library is an intimate spot with Italian leather chairs and red oak floors. Each of the 41 rooms and suites is appointed somewhat differently. Although fabrics may be worn around the edges, the flaws seem in

keeping with the patina of the inn. Room renovations are also underway. In the bathrooms, the bathtubs are being replaced with stand-alone showers. The *Presidential Suite* is the largest and most elaborately appointed chamber. We like the very attractive *Bluegrass Suite* (#311), which has a lower nightly rate. The inn's very good restaurant, Distilled, a leased establishment, is open for lunch and dinner Tuesday through Sunday. From Monday through Friday the inn offers a light Continental breakfast for \$6.

Editor's Tip: By calling the inn directly, we booked a two-night special that was not listed on the website.

RESTAURANTS

Distilled (Rating: A-), in the Gratz Park Inn, is a favorite among foodies looking for innovative Southern cuisine. The restaurant has a cozy little bar and an elegant casual ambience. The chef



Big Blue is home to the University of Kentucky's men's and women's golf teams

plays with Asian influences, notably in the tempura halibut starter and the lentil curry soup. House favorite entrées, such as the Shrimp and Grits and the braised rabbit with sage ricotta ravioli, cabbage puree, and braised cabbage, are simple, fresh, and tasty.

Le Deauville Bistro (Rating: B+), a corner restaurant just in back of the Gratz Park Inn, is a festive place for traditional French cooking. You will find plenty of classic bistro dishes here. The choice table is out on the sidewalk.

Our favorite restaurant in the historic district is **Dudley's on Short (Rating: A-)**. The airy dining room features large picture windows that look out on the street. Upstairs, there's a rooftop patio with lounge chairs and a few tables. Menu highlights include longtime Dudley's staples such as wilted Brussels sprouts salad and seared Ahi tuna with Port wine miso, black rice, and Wasabi. Dudley's has an excellent wine list and wonderful dinner bread.

The town's current steakhouse hotspot is **Tony's (Rating: B+)**. Located across from the University of Kentucky's Rupp Arena on Main Street, this bi-level contemporary-styled restaurant has a long bar with huge televisions. While many people come for the bourbon, raw bar, and pasta offerings, the filet mignon and the Sir Barton 14-ounce NY Strip are the biggest draws. Parking is quite limited on Main Street, but it seemed rather pretentious for Tony's to charge \$8 for valet parking. If you don't mind walking, there will likely be plenty of spots on the side streets above and behind the restaurant.



Lexington presents visitors with a full slate of horse-related activities. In April and October you can see top-flight races run at beautiful, historic Keeneland Race Track. The season at the beautiful Red Mile track, the second oldest harness racing track in the world, runs from late July to early October, but simulcast races are shown all year long. The Kentucky Horse Park is a family-friendly place with demonstrations and horse shows in corrals, barns, and arenas. You can also see a number of retired Derby-winning horses and visit the grave of Man o' War. The Horse Park is also home to the excellent International Museum of the Horse.

The Kentucky countryside between Lexington and Louisville is the bourbon capital of the world—the region produces 95 percent of the world's bourbon. Visitors can explore distilleries, learn about the history and crafting of bourbon, and enjoy



The Gratz Park Inn is ideally situated in Lexington's historic district

tastings at numerous distilleries on Kentucky's Bourbon Trail. The most convenient place to start your tour is the Barrel House Distilling Company, a craft bourbon producer that also produces beers like Bourbon Barrel Ale and Kentucky Ale.

Lexington is home to the University of Kentucky and its Wildcats sports teams. History and architecture buffs should tour Ashland, the estate of Henry Clay, the Kentucky statesman and "Great Compromiser" whose love of racing helped Lexington become "the Horse Capital of the World." The Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, which claims to be the largest preserved religious community in America, is a popular attraction 25 miles southwest of Lexington.

Griffin Gate Marriott Resort & Golf Club

griffingate.com/ griffingategolf.com; 859-288-6193
409 rooms and suites from \$xxx to \$xxx.
Green fee: \$29 to \$70.
Aerification: March and October.

Kearney Hill Golf Links

lexingtonky.gov/kearney-hill-golf-links; 859-253-1981
Green fee: \$14 to \$31(walking). Carts: \$14 per person.
Aerification: March and sometime in fall.

University Club of Kentucky

uclubkentucky.com; 859-381-8585
Green fee: Big Blue, \$47 to \$55.
Aerification:

Boone's Trace National Golf Club

btngc.com; 859-623-4653
Green fee: \$28 to \$41
Aerification: mid-March; mid-May; early and mid-September.

Gratz Park Inn

gratzparkinn.com; 859-231-1777
41 rooms and suites from \$179 to \$399.

COMING IN THE MONTHS AHEAD...

Hilton Head Island's Sea Pines Resort; Where to Play in Bordeaux and Biarritz, France;
Mossy Oak in Mississippi; North Carolina's Outer Banks

THE BEST CHARITY OUTINGS THIS SPRING

Here are some great charity events being held at private, Top 100 courses. For details, contact the sponsoring organizations. A portion of the cost may be tax deductible. Act quickly—space is limited.

Top-100 Golf Course	Date	Sponsoring Charity	Contact
Baltusrol Golf Club (Lower)	May 15	Children's Aid Society	childrensaidsociety.org/golf-classic
Boston Golf Club	June 13	National Kidney Foundation	nkfgolfclassic.com
Caves Valley Golf Club	May 9	G.B. Charities	gbcharities.org/upcoming_events/legacy_golfold.html
Colonial Country Club	May 22	various	colonialnit.com/pro-ams/foursome-packages Mike Zinga, 817-927-4299
Eastlake Golf Club	June 20	Els for Autism	elsforautism.com/golf_challenge
Fishers Island Club	May 27	Eugene O'Neill Theater Center	events@theoneill.org
Fox Chapel	June 5	Variety	varietypittsburgh.org zach@varietypittsburgh.org , 724-933-0460
Friar's Head Golf Club	May 23	Ann Liguori Foundation	annliguori.com/charitygolfevent.php
Hazeltine National	May 23	Els for Autism	elsforautism.com/golf_challenge
Honors Course	April 24	United Way of Chattanooga	uwgolf.org Patrick Long 423-752-0305
Hudson National Golf Club	June 6	NYP/Hudson Valley Hospital	hvhc.org 914-734-3526
Kiawah River Course	June 5	National Kidney Foundation	nkfgolfclassic.com
Laurel Valley Golf Club	May 31	Wesley Spectrum	wesleyspectrum.org/event/2017-golf-invitational/
Lone Palm Golf Club	April 21	National Kidney Foundation	nkfgolfclassic.com
Maidstone Club	June 7	Guild Hall	guildhall.org/benefit-events/more-events/
Maidstone	June 8	Ann Liguori Foundation	annliguori.com
Mayacama Golf Club	June 6	Schulz Celebrity Golf Classic	theschulz.com
Myopia Hunt Club	June 26	Fairway for Kids	rfkchildren.org/events/fairway-for-kids
Oakmont Country Club	April 24	St. Anthony School Programs	stanthonschoolprograms.com 724-940-9020x104
Plainfield Country Club	June 5	Drew University	drew.edu/alumni/events/blue-green-golf-outing
Quaker Ridge Golf Club	June 6	Big Brothers Big Sisters NYC	bigsnyc.org/events/golf
Rich Harvest Farms	June 13	Els for Autism	elsforautism.com/golf_challenge
Shinnecock Hills Country Club	June 13	Project ALS Golf Classic	erin@projectals.org
Victoria National	April 17, 18	Various	ulcgolf.com Lauren Cates, 812-430-6737