

M I D W E S T

Although a municipal course, the Aldeen at Rockford has the look and feel of an exclusive country club

MIDWEST

road trip will produce infinite pleasures

REPORT & PICTURES: David J Whyte

For most of us, the Midwest is an unknown quantity. As far as your average British golfer goes this is virgin territory, frontierland, a gap on the golf map.

The Midwest hardly even gets a mention in the popular guidebooks. The Middle, the West – heck, Jim Bob, it's not even in the middle, nor the west!

I finally deduced they must be trying to hide something, confuse us, put us off the trail!

The city of Milwaukee has one of the world's largest breweries. But I didn't let a little beer sampling get in the way of some fantastic golf. From Chicago Airport, I resolutely stuck to Lake Michigan's shores, heading north to the town of Kohler.

The Whistling Straits course played host to the 2004 PGA Championship and is the chosen venue for the 2007 US Senior Open, the 2010 and 2015 PGA Championships and the 2020 Ryder Cup.

Yes, I know it's a long way off, but this just shows the stature of this relatively new tour venue.

Once the site of a pan-flat landing strip, the

Straits, and its neighbour the Irish, are now buxom examples of billowing, swaying seaside links.

Americans are extremely good at doing what they please when building golf courses and in this new age of course construction, Whistling Straits is in the vanguard.

Overlooking Lake Michigan this waving wonder was the vision of Herb Kohler Jr, whose family established the town of Kohler in the 1800s.

Mr Kohler amassed his fortune partly in bathroom fittings and is feeling so flush he recently bought St Andrews Old Course Hotel in Scotland, along with its Duke's Course overlooking the Auld Grey Toon.

We set off to play the Straits, two caddies per four-ball. Our bagman Louis, was twice the normal carrier, a keen player and certified golf addict.

"I live to be out on a golf course, either golfing or caddying," he told me, his winters spent working at Augusta National and his summers here in Wisconsin.

When it came to his advice, if only I could do what he told me to! But with infinite patience,

WHISTLING STRAITS FACT FILE

Address: 444 Highland Drive, Kohler, WI 53044. **USA Tel:** 00 1 866 847 4856 **Website:** www.destinationkohler.com **Length:** 36 holes – Straits Course, 18 holes, par 72, 6,909 yards; Irish 18 holes, par 72, 6,750 yards **Green fees:** Irish Course \$141 (£78), Straits \$270 (£150) **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range, chipping and bunker practice areas, putting green, buggy and trolley hire, club rental

BLACK WOLF RUN FACT FILE

Address: 1111 W Riverside Drive, Kohler, WI 53044. **USA Tel:** 00 1 866 847 4856 **Website:** www.destinationkohler.com **Length:** 136 holes – River Course, 18 holes, par 72, 6,607 yards; Meadow Valleys Course, 18 holes, par 72, 6,735 yards **Green fees:** River \$189 (£105), Meadow Valleys \$141 (£78) **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range, chipping and bunker practice areas, putting green, buggy and trolley hire, club rental

THE BULL AT PINEHURST FARMS FACT FILE

Address: One Long Drive, PO Box 112, Sheboygan Falls, WI 53085. **USA Tel:** 00 1 920 467 1500 **Fax:** 00 1 920 467 1501 **Email:** info@golfthebull.com **Website:** www.golfthebull.com **Length:** 18 holes, par 72, 6,867 yards **Green fees:** \$155 (£86); 7 to 9am \$125 (£69); after 2pm \$95 (£53) **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range with target greens, chipping and bunker practice areas, putting green, buggy and trolley hire, club rental



Whistling Straits has been chosen to host a number of future high-profile tournaments, including the Ryder Cup



The Jack Nicklaus-designed The Bull course is already an award winner

Louis guided us over the Straits and narrows to an exhilarating experience of this magnificent course.

Apart from an over-exuberance of bunkering, Whistling Straits is not as difficult as you might think. I scraped an 84 with some dreadful putting, not bad the day after a trans-Atlantic flight.

There are four fine courses near Kohler. The River Course at Black Wolf Run is fairly difficult, especially playing into the greens, with the

Sheboygan River and overhanging trees coming into play on many holes.

The Meadow Valleys Course looked less formidable, though we didn't play it. The Straits and Irish make up the Kohler foursome.

The standards and service at Destination Kohler are exemplary, all you would expect from such a classy facility. Prices, of course, reflected this – the Kohler area is the upmarket end of America let alone the Midwest.

Only 20 minutes away from the town of Kohler is The Bull, designed by Jack Nicklaus and recently voted the best new daily-fee course in America by Golf Week magazine. The River also gets high ratings although I think Americans go overboard with these acclaims. Everybody seems to get a gold star for something or other – Best Ball Cleaner on the back nine, Best Little Corn Beef Sandwich in Texas, Prettiest Beer Wagon Attendant and so on. I suppose it's all part of the motivational machine that makes America so good at what it does.

A visit to the USA is more often than not a road trip and we were delighted to have the new NeverLost GPS navigation system on board our rental car. So far it is only available in the US and some Canadian cities.

Not only did it guide us to the golf courses without a hitch but we could easily find local restaurants and hotels by just dialling in the address and following the voice prompts. The system works really well, saved us loads of time and was a bit of in-car entertainment on the

side. You can order it when booking your rental car at Hertz.

The State of Wisconsin itself was a revelation, one of those places I had no previous concept of, but it turned out to be one of the prettiest, most interesting, most welcoming areas I've ever visited.

I met an Englishman serving behind a bar in the resort town of Elkhart Lake. British accents go down very well here! If you stop for a beer or bite you'll end up shooting the breeze with the locals or holidaymakers. I could have easily dropped anchor and spent a week getting to know the place.

There are several golf courses worth stopping for. Wisconsin has over 500 public courses. We sampled Quit Qui Oc Golf Club near Elkhart Lake, a mere \$28 for a round through the week and \$14 for a buggy. That translates to around £23 per head including the chariot.

There is, of course, a difference between public courses and the pampering and preening that goes on in expensive resorts like Whistling Straits but, to be honest, Quit Qui Oc was more what I was used to and, as a course, more than adequate.

Green Lake is a short drive from Elkhart Lake, the oldest resort area west of Niagara Falls. There are four courses here offering packages of three or four days' resort golf staying at local hotels.

The Lawsonia courses have been around a while and didn't have the presentation that we Brits enjoy in the States, but the Woodlands course was moderately challenging among the trees.

Its sister course, the Links, promoted itself as a British Open type venue, whatever that means. Built in the 1930s, it might have been novel then to those who didn't know proper links courses. It can do with an overhaul now and a less misleading name!

The best course we encountered in this part of Wisconsin was in Verona, near the state capital of Madison.

Madison is a college town and centre of local government; a distinctly laid-back and easy-going city.

Walking, cycling and boating seem to be the main activities, unusual for the heart of a state capital but just great for holidaymakers. Even the buses have carrier racks for bikes in case you need a lift.

University Ridge Golf Club was out of town a little but a classy layout, with bags of room on some holes calling for length off the tee then tighter and more technical on others.

The course is run by the university and in supreme condition, a must for the itinerary.

Rockford, Illinois, is another place name you might not be familiar with, an hour from

QUIT QUI OC FACT FILE

Address: 500 Quit Qui Oc Lane, Elkhart Lake, WI 53020. USA **Tel:** 00 1 920 876 2833 **Fax:** 00 1 920 876 3581 **Email:** qqogolf@hotmail.com
Website: www.quitquioc.com **Length:** 27 holes – main course, par 71, 6,111 yards; Glacial Nine, 9 holes, par 35, 3,003 yards **Green fees:** Weekdays \$29 (£16), weekends \$34 (£19) **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, practice areas, buggy and trolley hire, club rental

UNIVERSITY RIDGE FACT FILE

Address: 9002 County Road PD, Verona, WI 53593. USA **Tel:** 00 1 608 845 7700 **Website:** www.universityridge.com **Length:** 18 holes, par 72, 6,429 yards **Green fees:** Opening-Apr and Oct-close, weekdays \$38 (£21), weekends (Fri-Sun) \$45 (£25); May-Sep, weekdays \$58 (£32), weekends (Fri-Sun) \$74 (£41) **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range, chipping and bunker practice areas, putting green, buggy and trolley hire, club rental



The South Course at Eagle Ridge is reasonably tight but ideal for all standards

Chicago and a world away in terms of the cost of a game of golf. It's a great staging post if you are heading further west from either Chicago or the Kohler area.

If you think low cost equals low quality, let me introduce Aldeen Golf Club. Aldeen is a public course run by the city of Rockford by the people, for the people.

To look at it and indeed play it you'd think you'd strayed on to an expensive, exclusive country club, but Aldeen costs \$39 a round,

which is less than £21. And if you play after 3pm, it costs just over a tenner. I've rarely, in fact, never seen such a well-designed, well-maintained, well-presented municipal golf course. It was delightful!

Mr Aldeen was a local industrialist and golf fanatic and it was he that put the money up to have the course built before presenting it to the city. What a man!

Aldeen is exceptional but there's nothing wrong with Rockford's dozen or so other public

courses. We played the Elliot and the Ledges, both outstanding tests, the Ledges suffering a little from drought conditions when we visited but clearly a decent, challenging layout.

Here's the uncanny bit: green fees at these two courses dipped below the \$20 level - through the week and at regular tee times. That's great golf for just over £10. What more can a Scottish golf nut like me ask for!

As you might imagine, Rockford has received truck-load of top ratings for places to play. It's the best mid-sized city for golf according to Golf Digest and has had a host of other accolades bestowed upon it.

Rockford is also doing a great job in encouraging kids. The Tiger Woods Foundation chose the Rockford community to host one of four national two-day Tiger Woods Junior Golf Clinics. Golf interest among teenagers has leapt

EAGLE RIDGE FACT FILE

Address: 444 Eagle Ridge Drive, Galena, IL 61036. **USA Tel:** 00 1 815 777 5000 **Fax:** 00 1 815 777 4502 **Website:** www.eagleridge.com **Length:** 63 holes – The General, 18 holes, par 72, 6,434 yards; North Course, 18 holes, par 72, 6,386 yards; South Course, 18 holes, par 72, 6,344 yards; East Course, 9 holes, par 34, 2,461 yards **Green fees:** Non-resort visitors (resort guests 15% discount) – Oct, weekdays North and South Courses \$85 (£47), The General \$115 (£64), East Course \$35 (£19), weekends (Fri-Sun) North and South Courses \$95 (£53), The General \$125 (£70), East Course \$45 (£25); Jun-Sept, weekdays North and South Courses \$120 (£66), The General \$150 (£84), East Course \$40 (£22), weekends (Fri-Sun) North and South Courses \$140 (£76), The General \$170 (£94), East Course \$50 (£28); Nov-Feb, all week North Course only \$50 (£28) **Facilities:** Resort hotel, clubhouse, restaurants, bars, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range, chipping and bunker practice areas, putting green, buggy and trolley hire, club rental, indoor pool and hot tub, fitness centre, numerous other activities

TPC AT DEERE RUN FACT FILE

Address: 3100 Heather Knoll, Silvis, IL 61282. **USA Tel:** 00 1 309 796 6000 **Fax:** 00 1 309 796 2000 **Website:** www.tpc.com **Length:** 18 holes, par 71, 6,426 yards **Green fees:** May-Sep, before 1pm \$70 (£39), 1-4pm \$60 (£33), after 4pm \$45 (£25); course opening-April and Oct-course closing, before 2pm \$55 (£31), after 2pm \$45 (£25) **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range, chipping and bunker practice areas, putting green, buggy and trolley hire, club rental

GLYNN'S CREEK FACT FILE

Address: 19251 290th Street, Long Grove, Iowa 52756. **USA Tel:** 00 1 563 328 3284 **Website:** www.scottcountyiowa.com/glynnscreek **Length:** 18 holes, par 72, 6,353 yards **Green fees:** Weekdays (Mon-Thur) \$18 (£10), weekends \$27 (£15) – buggies mandatory before 2pm at weekends **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range, practice areas, buggy and trolley hire, club rental



Every hole is a delight at the TPC at Deere Run



Water provides a picturesque feature on many holes, such as here at the third

from around 200 players 20 years ago to more than 4,000 today. Rock on Rockford!

The road from Rockford to Galena rolls over some of the prettiest scenery in the Midwest. This area was bypassed by the great, land-levelling glaciers of the ice ages, leaving a delightful, undulating terrain not unlike the Scottish Borders or the English Cotswolds.

Eagle Ridge Resort makes fine use of this topography, especially on its premier track, the General.

The General is not an easy course to get along with. It recruits heavy forest and dramatic variations in elevation as its main defence. I came off rather shell-shocked and in need of a dram or two but it is a good test if you can fire straight and don't mind the odd uphill assault. Less demanding are Eagle Ridge's two other 18-hole courses, the North and South. Both are ideal for all levels of player, the South being the tighter but not overtly punishing while the North is a pleasure of wide, sweeping, billowing fairways.

We enjoyed it here and would happily have spent another day or so playing these lovely resort tracks, especially the North.

The town of Galena is equally delightful, a leap back in time to one of the most charming places you'll find in the Midwest. Again, foreign tourists don't seem to have reached this area, mostly enjoyed by busy Chicagoans looking to de-stress in this rural, laid-back idyll. Who can blame them!

But who also would suspect we would find a little corner of Ireland tucked away in interior Illinois. The Irish Cottage is just one of Galena's many unusual and delightful surprises. We spent two nights quaffing pints of Guinness, watching Irish Folk dancers and an effervescent Irish band laying on the entertainment.

The craic, as the say, was as good as you would find in Killarney!

You can also stay on the Eagle Ridge Resort

close to the golf in fully furnished villas, ideal for small golfing groups or families.

Just a short drive south from Galena and a three-hour drive west of Chicago, my ultimate base on this American Heartland Trail was the Quad Cities, four modest-sized communities established on the Iowa and Illinois sides of the Mississippi River. The towns of Davenport and Bettendorf in Iowa and Rock Island and Moline in Illinois, have undergone major transformations in recent years, bringing life, entertainment and culture back to their hearts. Each of the four downtowns has had a huge cash injection and is now alive with music bars, art galleries, restaurants and museums.

You can catch a riverboat for a meal on Old Muddy or, indeed, take an overnight riverboat cruise, capturing the razzmatazz of the Mississippi in its Dixieland heyday. There are casino boats to fritter away your earnings on the golf course or, for the more sporting, superb bicycle paths following the riverbanks for miles. Golf has followed a different course in this area also, again aimed firmly at local enthusiasts. Being far from either coast, they never expected a British invasion, but then they shouldn't have made the place so darned attractive.

Once again, price plays its part and most of the municipal courses I played wanted a mere \$18 for the privilege. There were a dozen excellent courses within the Quad City

EMEIS FACT FILE

Address: 4500 W Locust Street, Davenport. Iowa. 52803. USA **Tel:** 00 1 563 326 7825 **Website:** www.cityofdavenportiowa.com **Length:** 18 holes, par 72, 6,500 yards **Green fees:** Weekdays \$17 (£9), weekends \$19 (£11) **Facilities:** Clubhouse, restaurant, bar, changing rooms, showers, pro shop, driving range, chipping, pitching and bunker practice areas, putting green, buggy and trolley hire, club rental

catchment area and I was told of a few other exceptional examples only an hour or two's drive away.

How they can provide such excellent golf products at those kinds of prices I don't know, but hey, who's arguing. Best keep it quite or they might catch on.

John Deere, the agricultural and greenkeeping equipment giant, is based in Moline, Illinois and has a major investment in the area's premier tournament players' course, TPC at Deere Run, now a firm fixture on the US PGA Tour.

We played this course first and were amazed with every hole. It's a great test and you get top-drawer treatment from the minute you pull into the drive for a mere \$45 per round (after 2pm) including a golf cart and practice. That, my friend, is a mere £25.

The Quad Cities seem to be thriving on their recently reinvented cultural status. We ate at some superb restaurants, enjoyed first-class after-dinner entertainment and even found time to fit in a museum or two.

Special mention here must go to the River Music Experience in Davenport. If you're an old rocker like me, this is a day-trip in itself and a revelation on how modern music was influenced and developed on the banks of the Mississippi.

We played at several excellent public layouts around town. Emeis golf course was exceptional, as was Palmer Hills and Highland Springs.

The new nine-hole Pebble Creek at the back of Bettendorf was well worth going round twice. All of these courses cost a mere \$18 per outing. The other course to play in the area was a little bit north of Davenport, within the bounds of Scott Country Park.

Glynn's Creek still seems quite new, laid out between mature stands of trees and variegated jungle. You can access information about all the Quad Cities' courses at www.allgolfqc.com.

The Midwest is currently America's best-kept golfing secret, no doubt about it. Low prices are a consideration but the friendliness of the locals, the rolling, gentle scenery and the sheer enjoyment of sampling Real America are all equally appealing.

Many of the courses we played were municipal but it seems the American cities involved here are going out of their way to create new standards in public golf courses, encouraging their citizens to play the game and keeping prices within everyone's reach.

An American road trip like this has a host of pleasures, on the golf course and off. Just cruising the USA is a pleasure in itself. A few words of warning, though: you are sure to put on weight. And take an extra suitcase because shopping bargains are as cheap as the golf!

GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus (www.flyaerlingus.com) offer the best summer fares we could find to Chicago via Dublin – if booked well in advance. American Airlines (www.aa.com) flies direct from Glasgow to Chicago.

Hertz Car Rental offers pre-paid World on Wheels all-inclusive rates which start at £132 for a 7-day rental collecting from Chicago Airport. Book online at www.hertz.co.uk or telephone 08708 484848 or call a travel agent. For details on the NeverLost GPS navigation system visit also www.hertz.co.uk.

For some general golfing information on the Midwest visit www.midwestgolfguide.com.

For a free guide to all of Wisconsin's 400-plus public golf courses, with contact information, visit www.travelwisconsin.com, the official state travel website. They will also send free travel guides.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin

Road America is one of the US's premier racing tracks. It's a great all-American day out, with "beer, brats, and sweet corn" fuelling the spectators. Details from www.roadamerica.com. The town of Elkhart Lake is delightful, with sandy beaches and a laid-back ambience – a great family destination. More information from www.elkhartlake.com.

Green Lake, Wisconsin

A top tourism destination for more than a century, Green Lake is the deepest in the state, making for an excellent trout and walleye fishery. There are water sports aplenty and a beautifully restored opera house. Information from www.visitgreenlake.com.

Berghoff Beer

Wisconsin is famous for big-time beer brewing such as Miller's but visit the dozens of micro-brewers throughout the state to find a better brand. Details from www.huberbrewery.com

Madison, Wisconsin

The City of Four Lakes, Madison is the state capital and a modern, academic, hip city with a downtown that you can happily walk around. Head for State Street for a diverse stroll – book stores, ethnic and inexpensive restaurants. Further information from www.visitmadison.com.

Rockford, Illinois

The Anderson Japanese Gardens is the best Japanese garden in North America. Visit www.andersongardens.org. The Burpee Museum (www.burpee.org) is the home of Jane, the most complete and best-preserved juvenile Tyrannosaurus Rex in the world and the Midway Village (www.midwayvillage.com) is an outdoor living history museum, with 24 life-sized buildings dating from 1900.

Galena, Illinois

Galena is not just a pretty little town. There's lots here and you can tour historic sites with a guide or take a narrated trolley tour. General Grant's home is one of the highlights or just browse the dozens of speciality gift shops. More details from www.galena.org

Muddy Mississippi

The Mississippi is, perhaps, the greatest attraction in the Quad Cities. There are old-style river boats and water taxis. You can gamble Maverick-style or cruise overnight. There is also an excellent system of bike paths following the river. Information from www.visitquadcities.com

Figge Art Museum

The Figge Art Museum is Iowa's oldest regional art collection now housed in a beautiful, state-of-the-art building overlooking the Mississippi River in Davenport. It hosts regional artists, travelling and permanent exhibitions, educational spaces and public amenities. Visit www.figgeartmuseum.org.

River Music Experience

A one-of-a-kind music centre tracing the people, places, styles and movement of America's music via the Mississippi. Rock-n-roll, jazz, gospel, country, the blues – they're all on tap through high-tech exhibits, live music and entertaining programmes in downtown Davenport, Iowa. More information from www.rivermusicexperience.com.

John Deere Pavilion

Golfers might be interested in visiting the John Deere Pavilion in Moline. The displays are mainly agricultural but still very impressive. Visit www.johndeereattractions.com