

# Join the club!

Combining a holiday with a round (or two) of golf is proving ever popular. **DAVID WHYTE** shares his unique insight into the life of a golf travel writer as he goes in search of the world's glorious greens.

**T**he game of golf is more popular than ever. The latest statistics indicate that a fair few of us are taking a holiday with golf as its primary focus.

There are 27.8 million golfers in the US, just over 12 per cent of the population, with one in eight playing golf on holiday. And in the UK, we're told nearly 850,000 people up sticks and travel for golf each year.

On the back of that are a few fatigued — or fortunate — souls like me trying to figure out the best courses to play. It's a tough job but someone has to do it!

So how do you become a golf travel writer and photographer? Golf loomed large in my early days with a father and several uncles spending most of their time at the local municipal course. I received encouragement and tried to come to grips with a cut-down 7-iron — but to no avail.

I resisted the game's allure until I was in my thirties. By then I had become a landscape photographer specialising in scenes for calendars and postcards, and I had produced





several calendar titles based on the glories of my native Scotland. A golf calendar was inevitable since it's one of the most emblematic elements of the country.

"I can write as well," I offered when one of the UK's main golf magazines commissioned me to take pictures on a regular basis and before I knew it, my career had taken a hitherto unforeseen, rather sharp dog-leg towards 'the gowf' (a 16th century Scottish word for golf).

### **Catching the light**

Golf landscape photography is almost as much of a passion for me as playing the game. Ideally, that part of the job gets done first thing in the morning or an hour or so before the sun goes down when the undulating fairways and billowing greens appear at their best.

That leaves the rest of the day to play the courses, enjoy the local cuisine and research the attractions. I've been doing this job for 15 years now and, although I will argue that it is

at times quite demanding work, I wouldn't – nay couldn't – swap it for any other job on the planet.

One thing I realised through sore experience is that it's best not to mix these activities. I've tried wielding a camera while playing a round, an ideal scenario you would think – catch a few shots while discovering the delights of the golf course. It doesn't work! Something has to give and it's usually the golf. It's far better to do one thing at a time – shoot the pictures, then play the course, and then sit back to interview the pro. You're allowed a beer for that one.

### **The world of golf**

The two questions I always get asked, for which I've yet to offer a satisfactory answer, are where do you most like to play, and which is your favourite golf course? More on that later. But having just left its mapled shores, Canada is fresh on my mind. It's a good example of what is going on in the golf travel industry. In recent years, the country has expanded

## PEOPLE AND PLACES

Perhaps more than any other sport, golf is sociable and on my travels I meet a lot of people. Abroad a single golfer is teamed up with the next two- or three-ball. In this way I've played with surgeons, stockbrokers, self-made millionaires, students and knights of the realm. There is one thing that links them all and reduces them to a common denominator — golf.

## GOING WILD

Golf's not just about hitting the ball. There are magic moments when something out of the ordinary 18 holes crops up. Bobcats, black bears, bald-headed eagles, wolves, orcas, alligators and even moose have made an appearance during a round. Contrary to some beliefs, golf courses can be a haven for flora and fauna that otherwise struggle to find a home amid urban sprawl and intense farming. The more commonly sighted ducks and geese, swallows and skylarks all seem to thrive around the greens. As more enlightened greenkeeping legislation comes into effect and the use of pesticides is restricted, this can only increase.

## LIGHTEN THE LOAD

If you're tired of lugging golf clubs along with the luggage, try hiring. In the US and Canada, they nearly always hire out the current, top-of-the-range models at quite reasonable rates. The clubs might take a hole or two to get used to, so take them out on the practice range before the round. It's also a great way to try-before-you-buy new models.



**Pictured:**  
Tecina Golf, La  
Gomera in the  
Canary Islands.

its golf offerings immensely and is making sufficient noise about it to attract attention.

Prince Edward Island (PEI as it's known) has suddenly become a prime destination for the travelling golfer. It has spent the last three years scooping up awards such as Number 1 Golf Island in North America and is in the top 10 world golf holiday destinations. With 21 to choose from, 10 of PEI's courses are listed in the Top 100 Best Courses in Canada.

I spent a few days in southern Ontario and Niagara-on-the-Lake. Niagara Falls is just down the road and was, until recently, not that interesting to golfers. Now, with the addition of several world-class courses such as John Daly's Thundering Waters, Grand Niagara and Legends Golf Club, two fabulous casinos and a major spruce up of the downtown area, Niagara is a worthy location offering lots to do for non-golfing family and friends.

Niagara-on-the-Lake, just a 20-minute drive along the Niagara River, is a charming and demure town where you can enjoy its wineries, theatre and walks.

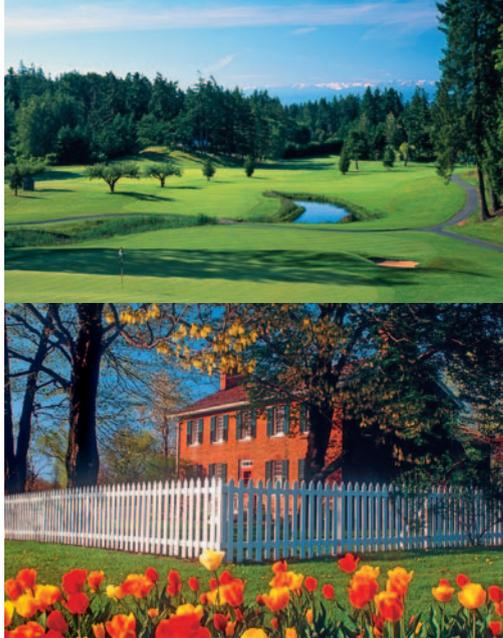
Then there's the grand Canadian west. Flying direct from the UK you can be in Calgary or Vancouver in about nine hours. I visited Vancouver Island on this trip and was delighted with all I found. Bear Mountain Golf and Country Club and Olympic View Golf Club just north of the city of Victoria are two exceptional courses. The first is renowned for its enigmatic 19th hole — an addition Jack and Steve Nicklaus could not resist. They call it a 'gambling hole' — a dynamite, punchy par three with surely one of the best views in golf. Players stop to put on a side bet and savour the sight before getting on with the main game.

I have to say the most enjoyment I had on the trip was my whistle-stop tour of the courses in and around Whistler. The renowned ski location, about a two-hour drive up the Sea to Sky Highway north of Vancouver, is buzzing all year round — a sort of Aviemore meets St Moritz. The ambience (they call it the 'Whistler bubble') is clearly hedonistic, but hey, when you've come to enjoy yourself why worry?

The golf on offer — I counted six great courses within easy driving distance — is as exciting as any of Whistler's world-famous ski runs. Stop halfway on the Sea to Sky Highway for a round at Furry Creek Golf & Country Club. It offers an afternoon 18-hole round followed by dinner at an inclusive price you would rarely find for a single round in the UK.

## Golf around the globe

Being a Scotsman and accustomed to links, I generally enjoy North America for golf. Vive la différence! I discovered courses in the US Midwest last year that were easily the cheapest I've found.



**Pictured, clockwise from top left: The eighth hole at Olympic View Golf Club, Vancouver Island; Bear Mountain Golf and Country Club, also on Vancouver Island; the dramatic ninth at Furry Creek Golf & Country Club in Vancouver; historic McFarland House at Niagara-on-the-Lake.**



Working north from Chicago, I played the firmly upbeat Whistling Straits, which was expensive. However, I soon made up for it on a road trip through the states of Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa playing decent courses for as little as \$18.

Portugal and Spain have long been prime European destinations and I'm delighted to see continual upgrades of the products offered.

New courses appear on the mainland, in the Canaries and the Balearic islands. Excellent restaurants augment the experience, and the bar is once again being raised.

## Back to those questions...

So where is that ultimate destination and which is my favourite golf course?

The reason I never come up with a reasonable answer to either of these questions is this. If I'm enjoying the company, the scenery or finely timing that driver to delivering everything I and the club have to the back of the little white ball, right there and then, wherever I happen to be — whether it is Mauritius or Motherwell — it is about as good as golf gets.

Certainly, there are now dozens of wonderful places to play golf in the world but it's all about how good the game makes you feel, and that can be anywhere. ■

## travel facts

For details about holiday availability in areas close to golf courses, call RCI

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